

Origin and resolution  
in white teeth and  
autobiography of my  
mother.



Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* are texts primarily concerned with the process and results of colonization. Both follow the progression of the post-colonized generations, and both depict the struggle of the marginalized culture to define itself under the weight and scrutiny of the dominant culture, yet *White Teeth* follows the colonization to its historical conclusion: immigration. We see a cultural backlash of destabilized colonized nations following the colonist home. So what is the effect of these processes on the colonized and the immigrant? Are they one and the same? And what is the natural conclusion of these forms of cultural tension? The outcome is the same in both texts, though the processes are approached at different points in their development: a cultural identity cannot survive whole in a constant state of duality. Something must be resolved in order for a generation to emerge which can exist contained, unambiguous, and self defined. *White Teeth* shows us the long, winding list of events that result in the resolution of this generation, which it treats as a hopeful development, while *The Autobiography of My Mother* takes on a far more pessimistic view, where the only peace to be had is through cultural loss. The immigrant, as described by Smith, has a future, while Kincaid's colonized do not. Popular discourses of immigration are infused with ideas of hope: the land of opportunity, hope for our children, a tolerant safe haven, and so on, while discourses of colonization generally consist of mourning for an ineffable loss and domination by a relentless ruling culture. Both authors seem to adhere to these influences, and so the creation of the "uprooted" generation, portrayed in both texts, are each imbued with the respective attitudes. The uprooted colonized subject, as embodied by Xuela herself in *Autobiography*, is without future as well as past, while the, while the <https://assignbuster.com/origin-and-resolution-in-white-teeth-and-autobiography-of-my-mother/>

uprooted immigrant, symbolized by Irie's nameless daughter in *White Teeth*, has emerged from the shackles of the past, which is what provides her with her future. Xuela's disenfranchisement is obvious; it is the very basis of her character. Her mother died at the moment of her birth, as she so often invokes, and in that act she is defined of a child of death, a product of a defeated and overwhelmed culture with no roots. She is at first overwhelmed by this loss; her reoccurring dreams of a faceless mother and frequent letters to her father show Xuela's desire to find her roots. She does not shake herself of this belief until her abortion, when her decision not to procreate becomes her decision to withdraw from her last claim on her culture – her heredity. “ I had never had a mother, I had just recently refused to become one, and I knew that this refusal would be complete.” (97) Her refusal to give birth and thereby recreate herself in successive generations is a refusal to take part in the progression of a dead culture. She has separated herself from any place in the past or future of the land; in essence, she has resigned herself to her own death as an agent of a missing culture. She becomes her own culture, rooting her sense of self and love in what is inalienable from her: her body, her smells, and her corporeality. Her love affair with Roland also informs this. Xuela loves Roland because he represents herself – the only person she truly loves because she's the only person that cannot be taken from her or redefined. Like herself, he is a creature without a root – not through the loss of a mother but through the lack of a homeland. “ He was not a hero, he did not even have a country; he was from an island that was between a sea and an ocean, and a small island is not a country. And he did not have a history; he was a small event in somebody else's history, but he was a man... He was unpolished, but he carried himself as if he were

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precious.”(167) Like Xuela, Roland is without roots, but his reaction to this homelessness is to become a colonist himself, as we see through his many extramarital conquests. Xuela refuses to be colonized and has no interest in doing the colonization, because her only love and satisfaction comes from the possession of herself; she is an allegorical island in and of herself. Her love affair with Roland can therefore not sustain itself, for one cannot love without colonizing, while the other cannot be colonized. The plot of *White Teeth*, in contrast, begins far earlier in the process of this creation of this isolated generation; it tracks the roots of cultural identity back several generations, as far back as World War Two and earlier, with the birth of Irie’s daughter, the cultural free agent, not occurring until the very end. Her mother a mix of Caucasian and black, her father an unknown twin out of a family torn apart by differing cultural impulses, Irie’s daughter is the product of much cultural tension and strife, and yet she has emerged, freed from it. Her father is equally likely to be Magid as it is to be Millat, the two Bengali twins, and no test of blood or behavior could ever prove which it is. She is, in essence, both the child of anglicized Magid and of militant muslim Millat, and yet the daughter of neither. “ At first this fact seemed ineffably sad to Irie: instinctively she sentimentalized the biological facts, adding her own invalid syllogism: if it was not somebody’s child, did it not follow that it was nobody’s child?... A perfectly plotted thing with no real coordinates. A map to an imaginary fatherland. But then, after weeping and pacing and rolling it over and over in her mind, she thought, whatever, you know? Whatever. It was always going to turn out like this.” (426) Irie’s release of responsibility (Whatever) mirrors Xuela’s release in her refusal to bear children. It is the decision to relinquish claims on the bloodline of her culture, to become a free

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agent, the way Xuela is, and the way Irie's daughter will be. She has no father, no ties of duty to either Bengal or England. Yet Irie's syllogism, as the narrative states, is invalid. She is alive, as are Magid and Millat, and their daughter is the child of both and neither fathers. She is free to forge her own identity, taking what elements she likes from the diverse mix that is her background, released from the parental expectations of either. In *White Teeth*, it is not the cultural influence of the dominant culture, nor the stubborn persistence of the subjugated culture that causes conflict in the characters, it is the inflexibility of both, and the pressure of the previous generation on the current generation to remain the same. This pressure in the novel results in dysfunction, as represented in Irie's angry rant on the bus. "What a peaceful existence. What a joy their lives must be. They open a door and all they've got behind it is a bathroom or a living room. Just neutral spaces. And not this endless maze of present rooms and past rooms and the things said in them years ago and everybody's old historical shit all over the place." (426) Irie's daughter is progress, because in her divorce from the cultural expectations of her parents' generation, she is free to forge her own identity, not in lovelessness and isolation as Xuela does, but in relation to a society she may influence and help to create. To speak of Xuela's people's disenfranchisement is not to dismiss them as entirely passive - like Samad in *White Teeth*, the colonized nation is conflicted between two cultural influences, and this conflict manifests itself in dysfunction. Like Irie, like Magid, like Millat, these people are caught at the halfway point, bowing to foreign laws, and speaking French Patois, an "illegitimate" mix of European and African languages. Colonization being a process of domination, the cultural conflict of the colonized is tightly connected to discourses of <https://assignbuster.com/origin-and-resolution-in-white-teeth-and-autobiography-of-my-mother/>

power. Xuela's father is one half African, one half Scottish, and is the most colonizing presence in the novel. It is his European descent that takes precedence over his African, because to be African is to be "other", to be a lack, whereas to be English is to be a conqueror, an agent of a powerful, ruling class. Yet for all his power, Xuela's father is as damaged as she is, as incapable of love. He prizes himself highest of all things, as she does, and this is the source of both of their incapability to truly love anything besides themselves, but his self love is deeply different from hers. He is dependent on the power structures of the colonizing nation to give him dominion over himself, whereas Xuela has divorced herself from all those structures in order to love herself on her most basic, corporeal level. No matter how Xuela's father may try to distinguish himself from the lowly Africans of his dominion, he is never fully European, and never fully in control of himself because his entire sense of self comes from a power structure that was not made for him. When Xuela's father dies, and all the power of his origin is released from Xuela, she has a reaction not unlike that of Irie's daughter, with her 'severed puppet strings'. "...And when finally I was a true orphan, my father died not knowing me... my entire life so far, all seventy years of it, I had dreaded the moment when I would be alone; the two people I had come from, the two people who had made me, dead; but then at last a great peace came over me, a quietness that was not silence and not acceptance, just a feeling of peace, of resolve." (223) As great a loss of the past as both of her parents' deaths may be, they result in a freedom not unlike that of the paternally unbound child of *White Teeth*; however, the calm of

Autobiography of my Mother is not a positive calm, the calm of the resolution of tensions and strife, it is the calm of the dying who has given up and gone  
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gentle into that good night. It is a generation who has lost its roots and accepted their loss. Such a generation, being metaphorically dead, cannot give life, cannot pass their dead legacy on to the next generation, and Xuela, as an agent of that culture, cannot bear children. The immigrant in *White Teeth*, however, is a colonizer as well as a colonized subject, the power he wields being not personal but collective. No one culture, upon entering England, actively attempts to crush Western culture; instead, a general cultural bleed occurs, until the original definition of “Englishness” has shifted. The immigrant is surrounded at all times by his potential colonizer and may hold far tighter to his cultural traditions in the face of a threatening, dominant culture, in the end he is still, to some degree, tempted and changed to fit the land he lives in. Samad is the embodiment of this conflict; his faith in Islam and in his culture as “pure” is idealized to the point of impracticableness, and his yielding to English temptations (alcohol, gambling, and his affair with English woman Poppy Burt Jones) shows that he is divided at his core (justified to himself by his motto, Can’t say fairer than that!). A man so divided can only bear divided sons, one western at heart and the other eastern. Yet in their own ways, Magid and Millat are colonizers – Millat’s conquests after women, and Magid’s work on genetic modification each show an effort to control their world. The book goes on to mention dozens upon dozens of creeds and nationalities – from Sudanese to Greek to Irish – tucked neatly into the narrative to remind the reader of the prevalence of multiculturalism in England, and support this idea that there is no true “English” anymore – England has been colonized by those who were once the colonial subjects. It is perhaps notable, therefore, that in *White Teeth*, Archie, the most English of the English in the novel, is the only

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character without a strong sense of his history and past generations. “ We’re the chaff, boy, we’re the chaff,” Archie’s father once told him. “ I’m a Jones, you see. ‘ Slike a ‘ Smith.’ We’re nobody.”(84) Later in the novel, when Irie attempts to study her family’s history, she finds next to nothing on her father’s side. Archie’s brand of “ Englishness”, the fish and chips, bangers and mash, colonial homestead that he represents in his earthy way, is in fact, a myth. A fairy tale. White teeth without roots. Archie marries a Jamaican, has a genetically mixed daughter, and is comrades with a Bengali, identifying more with colonized cultures than with that of the empire itself. The colonized have followed him home, and the proverbial “ melting pot” has diluted the Anglo-Saxon history of the country, leaving behind only the myth of the English. This state is not unique to the United Kingdom, as on page 196 when Alsana discovers in the reader’s digest that Bengal is made up of “ Indo-Aryans”. “ Oi, Mister! Indo-Aryans... it looks like I am a bit Western after all! It just goes to show... you go back and back and back and it’s still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than it is to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe. You think anyone is English? Really English? It’s a fairy tale!” Xuela exists in a world where she is defined by what she is not: part European, but not the conqueror, part African but not colonized. She is not cultured, not important, not correct in the context of any social system besides that of herself and her body, because the social system to which she might have belonged has been destroyed. To Kincaid, to be without root is to be lost from the natural progression of your culture, to be both without mother or offspring, to be marooned from one’s place in history. Something irreplaceable is lost in the lives of the colonized. The loss of history, to Smith, is the loss of baggage, of weight, of chains. History and culture changes so

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constantly as to be impossible to pin down or determine, and to attempt to do so is to try to hold a handful of sand, creating only resentment in one's children and discontent in one's self. Irie's daughter's loss of the expectations of either of her cultures has made her free of these pressures. "Irie's fatherless little girl writes letters to Bad Uncle Millat and Good Uncle Magid, and feels free as Pinnochio, a puppet clipped of paternal strings." (448) To Kincaid, the robbing of the heritage of the colonized robs them of their future as well, while the cultural assimilation of the immigrant (also a form of loss of heritage) results in the formation of a new culture, neither eastern nor western but instead free from the expectations of the ruling generations of both. Such is the dichotomy implicit in the outcomes of both texts: Xuela's death weighed against Irie's child's birth.