

# Perceptions of cultural purity in white teeth



White Teeth, by Zadie Smith, provides complex characters whose psychology provides insight into the meaning of the novel. Samad Miah Iqbal is one character whose psychosis corresponds with the main theme. He chose to immigrate to England in order to provide a better foundation for his family, but is constantly faced with problems of integration. Samad is trying to stay rooted in Islamic religion while the country is swarming with different cultures. However, the Iqbals are unable to maintain their values in a country founded by colonialism and fused together with biracial families and friendships. This imbalance of ethnic identity leads Samad and his family to ultimately end up alienated and worse off than they started. Samad is a character that is intent on maintaining his Islamic identity. His reasons for immigration are based on personal and historical ties to England. Samad came to Britain after fighting in World War II, and he feels a sense of moral responsibility due to his great grandfather's role in the Indian Rebellion. Samad feels obligated to build a reputation of his own. On his way to earning the respect he deserves, he is accidentally shot in the hand by a comrade. This accident causes him to be deemed unworthy as a pilot, and he is then stationed in the "Buggered Battalion." This is the root of Samad's weakened identity. Samad runs off in front of the Russian Army high on morphine, waving his gun around, and threatens to commit suicide. Archie catches up to a distraught and angry Samad who says, "I'm a cripple, Jones. And my faith is crippled...I'm fit for nothing now, not even Allah, who is all powerful in his mercy. What am I going to do, after this war is over"(95). It is evident that Samad needs the model of his great grandfather to establish an identity for himself. A sense of accomplishment is important for Samad to become a man, and to ultimately obtain a core identity. Samad never got this chance.

It was stolen from him by an accident. Though the Islamic faith is one based on fate, Samad doesn't see the connection. Samad doesn't know who he is from inception. Now in England after the war, working from six in the evening until three in the morning, he feels less self worth. He gets lousy tips and is stuck in an unchallenging environment. Samad wishes he could wear a sign on his neck stating, " I AM NOT A WAITER. I HAVE BEEN A SCIENTIST, A SOLDIER, A STUDENT...I AM A MUSLIM BUT ALLAH HAS FOR-SAKEN ME OR I HAVE FORSAKEN ALLAH, I'M NOT SURE"(49). Samad, unsure about his relationship with Allah, is unable to feel a pure connection to his religion. Therefore, he is unable to provide his family with an authentic example of how to live an " Islamic life." Samad only knows what is constant in his life. That he has a wife, two kids, and his best friend is Archibald Jones. Though he admits he is acquainted with Archie's wife Clara, he claims that his Jamaican wife " is not that kind of black"(50). Samad cannot let down his walls, that his religion has instituted, and accept that he is a friend to someone who is black. Alsana and Samad are constantly arguing over the move to Britain and the upbringing of their children. She is upset that her children will grow up around Archie and Clara's daughter Irie, " half blacky-white" (51). Samad thinks that Alsana has been corrupted by British ideals and vice versa. Alsana argues with Samad over the point of moving and complains she has no food for her family. Samad, on the other hand, argues that there is meat in the freezer and if it were his mother in the kitchen she would, " work through the night preparing meat for her family...His mother did not spend the household money, as Alsana did, on prepared meals, yogurts and canned spaghetti"(190). It is impossible for them to balance their traditional Islamic ways and adapt to some British conventions. Samad

believes that there is a right way to live life, and they should remain true to “who they were” when living in Bangladesh. Alsana says, “ I am not like Samad Iqbal. I restrain myself. I live. I let live” (195). Apparently Samad and Alsana aren’t on the same page as far as keeping traditions and home economics. It is hopeless for them to raise their children without the influence of Britain on their core identities. Though Samad fought in a British war, cheats on his wife, and makes a habit of drinking in an Irish bar, he blames his family for breaking the mold of living a pure Islamic lifestyle. A storm hits the Iqbal house and Alsana sits on the sofa determined to wait it out. She is adamant about listening to Mr. Fish and says, “ If that Mr. Fish says it’s OK, it’s damn well OK. He’s BBC, for God’s sake!” (183). This attitude towards the storm is more closely connected to Muslim belief than Samad recognizes. In the Islamic religion fate is in the hands of Allah, and it cannot be controlled or contained by man. As they pack up the car for the Jones’, Samad is in disbelief when he sees the items they choose to bring with them as “ essential, life or death things” (184). Milliat chooses albums and posters of western culture; Alsana brings food, her sewing machine, and cigarettes. Samad’s relationship with God and his background as a soldier are the focus of his decisions. Angry with his family he says, “ No penknife, no edibles, no light sources. Bloody great... Nobody even thinks to pick up the Qur’an. Key item in emergency situation: spiritual support” (185). Samad is obsessed with his religion and the purity it calls for. Samad wanting to adhere to his religion is in no way a bad thing, but in the context of the novel, his attitude is a problem. He expects that his wife and two sons live an Islamic lifestyle but he does not commit or deliver any of his time to make this happen. Samad’s one attempt to enforce cultural purity is when he

sends his favorite son, Magid, back to Bangladesh. Ironically, he comes back several years later classically British and training to become a lawyer. His other son, Milliat, is alienated by his peers and turns to violence, drugs, and pop culture to find belonging. He joins a crew of fellow ethnic boys who also feel left out: " People had fucked with Dipesh and Hifan when they wore traditional dress in the playground. People had even fucked with Milliat, with his tight jeans and his white rock. But no one fucked with any of them anymore because they looked like trouble" (192-3). Milliat becomes the so-called leader of his crew and finally feels a sense of pride and belonging. However, Alsana's cousin doesn't believe this to be true. She says, " He doesn't know his arse from his elbow. Just like his father. He doesn't know who he is" (237). Though the focus of the novel is on the isolation and indifference of Samad's family, they aren't the only ones who are affected by the multiculturalism of Britain. Many native British, immigrants on the " Empire Windrush," and other surges of immigrants feel discriminated. Archie, Clara, and their daughter Irie feel isolated as well. Archie is not British enough, Clara is too black, Irie, too thick. As Alsana argues with Samad on what it means to be Bengali, she sums up the theme of the novel. Neither can verbalize a definition of Bengali, so Alsana looks it up in the encyclopedia. The definition explains that Bengali is simply a group of mixed ethnic minorities. She tells Samad, " It just goes to show, you go back and back and back and it's still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It's a fairy tale!" (196). Whether Bengali, British, or American, people are constantly struggling with their own identities. What we believe " to be" one day can be flipped upside down after a single

decision or mistake. Hopefully there is a core within us that we can hold onto, but other elements of us can change readily. The more rigid a person, the more difficult it is for him to adapt - something Samad would have done well to understand. Works Cited Smith, Zadie. *White Teeth* A Novel. New York: Vintage, 2001. Print. O'Grady, Kathleen. "White Teeth: A Conversation with Author Zadie Smith." *Atlantis. A Woman's Studies Journal*. 27. 1. (Fall 2002): 105-111