

Family relationships  
in white teeth,  
disgrace and things  
fall apart



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By comparing White Teeth with at least one other appropriate text, explore the presentation of family and family relationships in postcolonial literature. The 'metanarrative' of Zadie Smith's White Teeth differs from the direct linear narrative of other postcolonial texts such as Things Fall Apart and Disgrace. The metanarrative of White Teeth presents the strains and fragmentation of families in the postcolonial setting with a gently humorous, unserious and possibly optimistic approach whereas these other texts are more ambiguous yet emotive. The serendipitous events of White Teeth can at times become unrealistic, and Smith has been accused of neglecting characterisation for plot; however, in her three central families (the Joneses, the Iqbals and the Chalfens) she develops a powerful expression of the postcolonial struggles for her characters. Family and history are two central relationships in the postcolonial genre. Things Fall Apart begins with an explanation of Okwonkwo's history as the greatest wrestler in Umuofia and his attempts to move away from the reputation of his father as an unserious and unsuccessful Ibo man. Achebe develops the importance of family history and relationships throughout the novel and uses this to lament the destruction of the Ibo tradition with the arrival of the colonisers. The positive portrayal of Uchendu, a relatively distant relation for the extent of support he provides to Okwonkwo during his seven-year exile, is a central example of the family values celebrated in the traditional postcolonial novel from the perspective of the 'colonised'. While the history of Okwonkwo's father is not central to the narrative (beyond explaining some of the qualities possessed by Okwonkwo), Achebe uses the device to develop the understanding of the values of the Ibo and advance the more conventional postcolonial theme of the destruction of the livelihood of the 'colonised' by the arrival of the 'colonisers'.

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colonisers'. *White Teeth* presents a less serious approach to family history as it is an inconvenience more than the burden it became for Okwonkwo. The meeting of Magid and Millat in a neutral room (a concept that in itself allows the author to develop several ideas of the hybridity of multicultural Britain in trying to find a place with no 'history'), is presented with an unserious humour – "they take what was blank and smear it with the stinking shit of the past like excitable children". The profanity and images of "smear" and "excitable children" creates an unserious undertone to the issue of history and the conflicts of the past. The innocence of "excitable children" prevents family histories being considered malicious burdens but merely an element of the dislocated existence of the immigrant in the postcolonial society. The presentation of the family has a different effect in *White Teeth* to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as the novel moves into the 'post-post-colonial' genre. The 'post-post-colonial' perspective and the conflicts of the "second generation" as recognised by Neena, "niece of Shame." In her words "What are you afraid of, Alsi? He is second-generation," she emphasises a different conflict in the family than the traditional postcolonial texts. Where Achebe uses the family as a central feature of the rich culture of the 'colonised' after a number of generations, Smith shows the conflicts of identity created by the family. Because of the different situations of the two novels in terms of the 'coloniser-colonised' dynamic, the presentations of the issues are inevitably different. However, the focus on the postcolonial theme is not specifically on the values of the family but on the consequences of the conflicting values between the family and the individual. This is shown as Achebe presents sometimes uncomfortable details of the Ibo family traditions, such as having more than one wife and Okwonkwo's violence towards them, despite his

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generally positive perspective of the Ibo values. Similarly, Smith does not present a judgement of the families in her novel but shows the personal conflicts, particularly of her younger characters and Samad, as dislocated in the postcolonial society. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee presents abrasive attitudes by contrasting Lucy's acquiescence to rape (accepting that " maybe this is the price you have to pay") and David's refusal to accept the situation (with his belief that their life in the Eastern Cape is " like a dog"). Issues of politics and morality underpin the conflict between David and Lucy, who are " so far, so bitterly apart," whereas Smith does not address these themes. Instead, she focuses on the issues of identity and overcoming the dislocation and ' double-consciousness' of the second-generation immigrant. *White Teeth* presents the strains and fragmentation of families in the postcolonial setting through the contradiction of expectations and actions between generations. The Jones family has the least conflict; the connotations of the name itself as the stereotypical ' average' British family emphasises this expectation. The discord between Clara and Hortense is a major conflict in the family and as Clara successfully overcomes the burden of expectation of her mother, she may be interpreted as a successful embodiment of the transition from overbearing family expectations (due to her strict Jehovah's Witness upbringing) to a sense of independence in her marriage to Archie. However, some critics have regarded Clara as a major flaw in the novel, saying Smith " privileges plot over characterisation". Although Clara is not developed in detail and questions remain about the circumstances and satisfaction in her marriage, the conclusion - in which Irie marries Marcus because " you can only avoid you fate for so long" - may reflect a sense of optimism in the novel and not underdevelopment. Smith may be suggesting that the quarrels

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of family in the postcolonial confusion are not as significant as they may appear and that it may be more effective to accept the challenges with regret as shown by Clara because “ they cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow.” The nature of the Chalfen family could reflect an important postcolonial theme. The detailed family tree, “ an elaborate illustrated oak that stretched back to the 1600s” develops the contrasts of different families and histories in the postcolonial with the uncertain history of the Jones family. Although the Chalfens become figures of amusement in the novel, the way in which they “ referred to themselves as nouns, verbs and occasionally adjectives” has a similar quality to the insular family and tribal values of the Ibo. The attention to family relationships from both examples emphasises the overbearing elements of cultural and social expectation of families. The Chalfens become ironic as their seeming purity is undermined by the explanation that they are “ third generation [immigrants], by way of Germany and Poland, née Chalfenovsky”. Smith emphasises the eclecticism of most families in the postcolonial society through Alsana’s criticism that “ you go back and back and it’s still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person [...] Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It’s a fairytale.” The attempt of the Chalfens to claim “ purity” and be aware of their history is ironic because their family seems most strange despite being the most ‘ typical’ in terms of lineage. Therefore, the postcolonial view to the family in White Teeth is one that values variation and sees it as inescapable. The diversity of the family and the emphasis that there is no “ purity” may be a more positive conclusion on the family than the distance that emerges between David and Lucy in Disgrace or the complete rejection of Nwoye by Okwonkwo in Things

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Fall Apart. The aspiration of Irie to be like the Chalfens (“ she wanted their Englishness. Their Chalfishness. The purity of it”) is not only ironic but the essence of the struggle in the postcolonial theme to be “ normal”. In Things Fall Apart, Nwoye’s conversion for the elements of Christianity that question the doubts of his native culture about the murdering of new-born twins and Ikemefuna’s death shows a similar conflict in determining a personal identity. The nature of the conflict is contextually different in the two novels because of the change in the postcolonial to the ‘ post-post-colonial’ setting. Nwoye has a different challenge with his family in moving away from being ‘ normal’ to values he finds more attractive. However, Irie struggles to resolve her family history as she moves from a temporary desire to travel to Jamaica with Hortense to wanting the ‘ normal’ life of “ how some families are all the time”. In both situations, the relationship strains are similar, the conflict of generations in families as social values change become more complicated with the addition of differences in cultural values. Things Fall Apart begins by addressing the fundamental aspect of the conflict of generations in the family as Okwonkwo endeavours to move away from the reputation of his father. This struggle in itself is significant but occurs in a more complicated form as Nwoye decides to convert to Christianity which not only is a denunciation of a family history but of the basis of past values. However, Achebe’s primary intention is unlikely to be an examination of the consequences of the family from the arrival of the colonisers. Things Fall Apart considers the postcolonial from the consequences of an entire society and the Ibo people (as represented by Okwonkwo and his personal struggle throughout the novel) which is in contrast to the family concerns that are so central to White Teeth. The central family conflict in White Teeth is based on <https://assignbuster.com/family-relationships-in-white-teeth-disgrace-and-things-fall-apart/>

the Iqbals and the difficulties of Samad in adjusting to British society as he laments, “ You begin to give up the very idea of belonging. Suddenly this thing, this belonging, it seems like some long, dirty lie”. The decision to separate Magid and Millat emphasises the strains of the postcolonial setting on Samad and the ironies of the hybrid society as Magid returns as “ more English than the English”. It is the affair with Poppy Burt-Jones and his recognition that he must make “ a choice of morality” that leads him to his decision to send Magid to Bangladesh. The contrasts between Samad’s expectations of his children and his own actions are fundamental to the presentation of the family as dysfunctional and contradictory in postcolonial literature. The dislocation of Samad and his double-consciousness as he knowingly (such as his self-assurance “ to the pure all things are pure”) and unknowingly (such as his uses of phrases such as “ sometimes I don’t know why I bother” which has distinctly ‘ English’ connotations) contradicts himself is the device that creates much of the drama and humour in the novel. The return of Magid as “ more English than the English”, despite the attempts to give him traditional values with a Bangladeshi education, and the “ trouble with Millat” throughout the novel extends the tension between family desire and the hybridity of the postcolonial context. Millat embodies the same flaws as his father as he struggles to define a sense of identity and is unable to relinquish his sexual desires while seeking the inclusive reassurance of KEVIN. However, the tension in the novel is largely created as Samad attempts to mould Magid and Millat in to “ good Muslim boys”. The family is shown to be dysfunctional in White Teeth and the poignant criticism of Millat that Samad is a “ hypocrite” is more moving than the generally humorous approach throughout the novel. Although the novel contains poignant

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reflections from Samad of his isolation and the situation of his children, there is little dialogue from either Magid or Millat. The lack of voice to these characters and the generally humorous tone which is often created by the absurdity of chance events such as the breaking of both twins' noses may reflect the unserious and optimistic attitude of Smith to the strains of the postcolonial family. The conflicts endured by Samad and his conflicting values such as his willingness to drink alcohol but refusal to eat pork reflect the confusion of values that emanate from the immigrant family in the postcolonial setting. The description of Millat as "schizophrenic, one foot in Bengal and one in Willesden" emphasise the confusion and division created by the family. Although "in his mind he was as much there as he was here" the transformations and connotations of his "schizophrenic" character suggest an instability and uncertainty of his identity. A significant feature of the role of the family in the conflicts endured by the main protagonists is that Smith does not explicitly 'blame' the families for the contradictory characters of their children. Millat does not appear to be the victim of the 'foreign' values of his parents. Even actions such the burning of all his possessions because of his involvement in a protest in Bradford where, presumably, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* were publicly burned do not suggest a cultural dislocation in the family. (Some critics may use an example of where he claims to Joyce Chalfen that Samad had "kicked [him] out" to show the consequences of cultural differences on the family, although this statement appears to be part of the humour of his manipulation of Joyce for sympathy and). However, this presentation of discipline and the general treatment of Millat is not based on the cultural expectations of the family as might be suggested by the postcolonial genre <https://assignbuster.com/family-relationships-in-white-teeth-disgrace-and-things-fall-apart/>



but a disciplinary consequence of his actions, such as alcohol abuse, drug abuse and sexual promiscuity, which would be regarded as fair by most Eurocentric or other readings. The pragmatism of Lucy in *Disgrace* to accept the injustice of the Eastern Cape for her survival and the devastation of Okwonkwo at his perceived dishonour caused by Nwoye's conversion have distinct links to the general presentation of the family in the postcolonial. These three texts embody the conflict of new generations with older generations as social and cultural values shift. *Disgrace* and *Things Fall Apart* are more austere presentations of the postcolonial genre and the conflicts they explore are not definitively concluded but are left ambiguous. *Things Fall Apart* summarises the conclusion of the postcolonial struggle in general and the cause of conflict within the postcolonial family, "what is good among one people is an abomination among others". The difficulty of younger generations in overcoming these conflicting influences on their identity and character is a serious concern in both. The suicide of Okwonkwo is relatively unexpected and extremely ambiguous; Achebe leaves the reader to assess the impact of the colonisers on the Ibo. Similarly, David's character disintegrates and his actions are often difficult to interpret. In *White Teeth*, the family is a cause of frustration and confusion for the younger generations and they endure the difficulties of double-consciousness and dislocation in their attempt to determine their characters. In addition to the postcolonial conflicts of cultural identity, Smith includes adolescence and a series of unexpected, sometimes absurd, coincidences which gives the novel a humorous perspective. The optimism of Smith is epitomised in her development of the theme of chance and the attitudes of Archie, the least complicated character who allows his future to be

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determined by tossing a coin. Irie's outburst before the denouement of the novel is the most coherent presentation of the family. Her plea for "quiet" and for "space" and wish for a family in which "every single fucking day is not this huge battle between who they are and who they should be, what they are and what they will be" reflects the strains of the family in the postcolonial. The innocent detail of the nine-year-old Magid telling his friends that his name was "Mark Smith" concludes the position of the family in postcolonial literature. It can be an awkward burden, a cause of difference and a lifestyle that is different to those of friends and peers but it is not detested and is not usually a malicious force. Despite the struggles with family, Millat still refuses to hear the criticism of his mother by Joyce and Irie answers the seemingly ridiculous musings of Archie about the reasons that new bus-tickets have so much "information" on them which shows the underlying affection in their relationships. The haphazard, almost ridiculous, connections between the narrative strands of the lives of the three central families, their eclectic qualities and the juxtaposition of their mutual absurdity is the essence of the novel. While it creates the conflicts for the individuals of the story, they also combine to show the universality of dislocation and confusion in the modern multicultural society which is often the conclusion of the post-post-colonial genre as poets such as Imtiaz Dharker invites in 'Minority' to see the confused and alien identities of others and "recognise it as your own."