

The garden of
ideology: leafs and
leaflets in zadie
smith's white teeth



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“ Oh fuck me, another leaflet? You can’t fucking move-pardon my French-but you can’t move for leaflets in Norf London these days” (373). Leaflets, brochures, letters, and other forms of publication and circulation are recurrent motifs in *White Teeth* (much to the annoyance of people like Abdul-Mickey) and Zadie Smith explores the humorous and poignant results of her characters’ struggles to communicate. Smith characters have causes, and throughout her narrative they fruitlessly and comically attempt to press their own beliefs on others, refute others’ beliefs, and convert others to the correct way of thinking. Leaflets and other forms of publication are the tools they use to proliferate their ideologies and-as Ryan Topps declares to Marcus Chalfen, “ Myself and yourself are at war. There can only be one winner”- there is only room for one correct interpretation (421). Not surprisingly, these attempts to proselytize backfire and are ultimately unsuccessful. In Smith’s world, ideology is the culprit responsible for the most divisive differences between her characters and their most unyielding Manichean prejudices. Smith is not implying that ideology is a negative thing, but rather, that the attempt to exhort one’s individual beliefs on others is a waste of energy, because everyone has a different interpretation of truth that varies according to their own experiences, histories, and ideals. In *White Teeth*, ideological circulation is literally circular, because the vast majority of people are too obdurate to even listen to others’ views, much less alter their own belief systems. The inflexible and almost fanatic nature of belief, as well as the relentless need of different factions to publicize their opinions regardless of the result, reveals that something about ideology resists reality, that common sense does not carry over to the world of credo. Even letters sound like they are composed more for the addressor than to the addressee. Horst <https://assignbuster.com/the-garden-of-ideology-leafs-and-leaflets-in-zadie-smiths-white-teeth/>

Ibelgaufts frequently sends letters to Archie Jones detailing mundane and random occurrences in his life (which Archie doubtlessly does not care to hear), from “ I am building a crude velodrome” (13) to “ I am taking up the harp” (14) to “ each of my children has a vase of peonies on their windowsill” (163). Ibelgaufts also repeatedly offers Archie unasked-for advice and anecdotes from his own life that only he understands, and consequently, his letters sound as if written to a brick wall. Moreover, when Marcus and Magid write, it sounds as if they are addressing mirror images of themselves, vainly reflecting their shared ideas. Marcus: “ You think like me. You’re precise. I like that.” Magid: “ You put it so well and speak my thoughts better than I ever could.” Clearly, if Marcus and Magid did not think so much alike, there could never be “ such a successful merging of two people from ink and paper despite the distance between them” (304). Smith’s characters have insatiable drives to communicate, but more often than not, communication fails because there is no mutual or reciprocal response. Communication is most successful, as in the case of Marcus and Magid, when it challenges nothing, when it merely confirms previously held beliefs. Why, then, do people feel the need to publicize even when no one will listen? Smith writes, “[Samad] had instead the urge, the need, to speak to every man, and like the Ancient Mariner, explain constantly, constantly wanting to reassert something, anything. Wasn’t that important” (49)? Perhaps, as Smith seems to suggest, people have a heightened sense of their own importance. Because Hortense believes her daughter Clara is “ the Lord’s child, Hortense’s miracle baby” (28) she forces Clara to “ help her with doorstepping, administration, writing speeches, and all the varied business of the church of Jehovah’s Witnesses...This child’s work was just beginning” <https://assignbuster.com/the-garden-of-ideology-leafs-and-leaflets-in-zadie-smiths-white-teeth/>

(29). For Hortense, “ those neighbors, those who failed to listen to your warnings...shall die that day that their bodies, if lined up side by side, will stretch three hundred times round the earth and on their charred remains shall the true Witnesses of the Lord walk to his side. -The Clarion Bell, issue 245” (28). None of Smith’s characters have the slightest suspicion that they could possibly be wrong, and even in the face of contrary evidence, they still persist in their dogma. When the world does not end on January 1, 1914, 1925, or 1975, Hortense still has faith that the Lambeth branch of Jehovah’s Witnesses will correctly identify the exact date of the Apocalypse. Even when Samad breaks Islamic tenet after tenet, he still holds on to the belief that, one day, he will be a good Muslim. The self-importance of Smith’s characters is the fuel for the ideological fire, the impetus behind their circulation of belief. While Smith’s characters do not realize is that they preach like broken records, Smith is fully cognizant of the circuitous, ineffectual nature of gospel. “ The other problem with Brother Ibrahim ad-Din Shukrallah, the biggest problem perhaps, was his great affection for tautology. Though he promised explanation, elucidation, and exposition, linguistically he put one in mind of a dog chasing its own tail” (388). Dogma adheres most strongly to those, like Ryan Topps, who “ didn’t move, not an inch. But then, that had always been his talent; he had mono-intelligence, an ability to hold on to a single idea with phenomenal tenacity, and he never found anything that suited it as well as the church of Jehovah’s Witnesses” (421). In *White Teeth*, it appears that preaching and believing are inextricably related-as if the more one preaches, the stronger their beliefs become and the more they come to believe that their views are true. Bombarded by leaflets from all sides, Smith’s characters need to publicize their own ideas so that their

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voices are not immersed, consumed, or erased. Publication-the act of putting an idea on paper-is an attempt at permanence, the small insurance that the idea will exist as long as publication is in circulation. History is not the truth, but rather the story that survives. “ History was a different business...taught with one eye on narrative, the other on drama, no matter how unlikely or chronologically inaccurate” (211). By publicizing their beliefs, Smith’s characters attempt to put their individual marks on the history of ideas. Like Samad, who writes “ IQBAL” in blood on a bench because, as he says, “ I wanted to write my name in the world. It mean I presumed” (418), Smith’s characters all suffer anxiety over their own historical inconsequence. Upon finding his father’s name, Millat sneers at his father’s small contribution, thinking: “ It just meant you’re nothing...a man who had spent eighteen years in a strange land and made no more mark than this” (419). Samad believes wholeheartedly that his ancestor Mangal Pande is a hero, but Archie disagrees, arguing, “ All right, then: Pande. What did he achieve? Nothing” (213)! Though every book save one describes Pande as a military traitor, Samad chooses to believe the one “ bound in a tan leather and covered in light dust that denotes something incredibly precious” which claims the little known Mangal Pande “ succeeded in laying the foundations of the Independence to be won in 1947”-in 1857 (215). People are arbitrary and believe the ideas they will, and when an idea somehow relates to their self-concept, like Magal Pande’s heroism to Samad’s personal history, it becomes even more entrenched. Joshua Chalfen becomes a militant animal rights activist out of resentment toward his father, not because he actually cares deeply about animals. Even as he rants to Irie about the injustice of the battery chicken’s life, he admits that he is not yet a vegetarian (“ I’m

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becoming a fucking vegetarian”) and that he has not given up animal products (“ I’m giving up leather-wearing it-and all other animal by-products”). Smith’s characters seem to form opinions more from of a sense of ownership or self-centeredness than out of any great allegiance to the world of ideas. Ideology can be interpreted as a form of egotism, because it is necessarily self-reflexive; it links and anchors the subjective and the personal to the greater universe, and the act of defining oneself according to a presumption of absolute universal truth seems, like Samad’s supposition that Mangal Pande was Gandhi’s mentor, incredibly audacious. White Teeth does not comment on the truthfulness of ideology, on which beliefs are better than others, on who is right and who is wrong. Instead, Smith focuses on the ways that beliefs can become divisive and destructive when they are coercively applied to others. When Marcus publishes his article on FutureMouse, he receives hateful from “ factions as disparate as the Conservative Ladies Association, the Anti-Vivisection lobby, the Nation of Islam, the rector of St-Agne’s Church, Berkshire, and the editorial board of the far-left Schnews,” (347) and he is thoroughly bewildered at the response his experiment has provoked when, according to him, mapping the life of a mouse will help scientists understand how people live and why they die. People accuse Marcus of playing God, and Marcus argues that scientific knowledge exists for its own sake, that FutureMouse could not lead to a form of eugenics unless employed that way. “ Of course, he understood that the work he did involved some element of moral luck; so it is for all men of science. You work partly in the dark, uncertain of future ramifications, unsure what blackness your name might yet carry, what bodies will be laid at your door” (347). Marcus’ publication is innocuous on its own, but applied to <https://assignbuster.com/the-garden-of-ideology-leafs-and-leaflets-in-zadie-smiths-white-teeth/>

others or manipulated to apply to others (which Smith ostensibly hints is an inevitability), it can have devastating results. It is ironic that one of the most insightful quotes in *White Teeth* comes straight from Joyce Chalfen, a character who is habitually oblivious to reality. In an article about flowers and gardening, she says, “ If we wish to provide happy playgrounds for our children, and corners of contemplation for our husbands, we need to create gardens of diversity and interest. Mother Earth is great and plentiful, but even she requires the occasional helping hand” (258). Self-consciously and cheekily sentimental, Smith and Chalfen both acknowledge that the world is a garden comprised of many different types of plants, and in order to have a happy and peaceful world, we must learn to accept the diversity that surrounds us, which includes the different beliefs of others. We have no other choice. Zadie Smith quotes a famous song called “ As Time Goes By,” citing “ You must remember this, a kiss is still a kiss,/ A sigh is just a sigh;/ The fundamental things apply,/ As time goes by” (341). Smith suggests that some things, like ideology, never really change, that the “ fundamental” beliefs of people are sometimes so deeply rooted that they cannot be altered. We can litter the world of leaflets and change nothing. At such a monumental impasse, our only solution is acceptance.