

The quagmire of love and marriage in smith's white teeth



Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* depicts the relationship between love and marriage in a manner that contrasts from Western expectations. Set in the United Kingdom, the story primarily follows the relationship of Archibald and Clara as compared with the relationship of Samad Miah and Alsana. In many ways, these relationships would not be uncommon to Westerners, but in at least as many respects, these same relationships come to defy certain conventions that Western tradition imposes on the ideal marriage—in Britain's case, a couple that embodies British national identity.

Archibald and Clara represent a couple that, in large part, defies Western, conventional expectations of the ideal marriage simply by being an interracial couple in the first place. Archie is a White man who marries a Jamaican woman, and for that matter, she is toothless when he meets her. In this way, they challenge conventional aesthetics that Westerners are likely to associate with the idea of marriage, which are the surface details; however, a great deal of deeper challenges remain to also serve as a commentary on the differences between their marriage and those proposed by Western perspective.

One aspect of both marriages at which Western ideology cringes is the vast age differences involved. Archibald is forty-seven when he meets Clara who is nineteen, and this is the sort of age difference that makes Western society uncomfortable. Deeper still, though, is the fact that they appear to have met by chance, which is in keeping with a significant motif used in the text.

Western presuppositions about the ideal marriage, that which coincides with the model of British national identity, attributes this profoundly abstract and immeasurable notion of fate to those who are in love. The idea is that the

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ideal, budding relationship is fostered out of a love so powerful that it transcends both time and circumstance to ultimately bring two soul mates together, and while the text does hint at Archie's consideration of this possibility when he meets Clara, the pervasive motif of chance makes a significant showing as well and may even be read as overpowering the likelihood of fate as the reader continues due to how often chance appears.

As a matter of fact, the description of their, perhaps, chance meeting is described more as one of chance than of fate. Archie merely ponders the likelihood of it having been fate thereafter, but with fate comes a connotation of certainty that is absent in their meeting. If it were fate, some might argue that they should recognize the moment and appraise it accurately, but Archie and Clara are uncertain of how to classify the experience. The description of their meeting reads: A dark line would now be drawn underneath the whole incident, underneath the whole sorry day, had something not happened that led to the transformation of Archie Jones in every particular that a man can be transformed; and not due to any particular effort on his part, but by means of the entirely random, adventitious collision of one person with another. Something happened by accident. That accident was Clara Bowden. (Smith 56) The long and short of the narration depicts their encounter as an accident. On the basis of principle, the Western model of marriage suggests that an accident is not ideal but, rather, an unconventional precursor to marriage, and the result is that Westerners would likely view this as the more likely marriage to fail in comparison to one in which lovers claimed to be drawn by fate.

Samad and Alsana can be observed to extrapolate just as many challenges to Western conventions of the British model of marriage. In fact, it is worth noting that the British model would be that of a White couple as opposed to a Bangladeshi, immigrant couple. In addition to this, as has been mentioned, Samad and Alsana have a comparable age difference to that of Archie and Clara. In many of the aforementioned, superficial and aesthetic ways, Samad and Alsana fail to meet the rigidly conservative parameters of Western expectations of marriage.

In addition to these superficial upsets, Samad and Alsana's relationship also serves to create several deeper challenges to the aforementioned, Western conventions just like Archie and Clara's relationship. The institution of marriage, as conceptualized by Western tradition, is meant to perpetuate the true love that was initially fated. Satisfaction with the resultant relationship, in fact, is supposed to magically be automatic, but of course, the Iqbal marriage holds no such delusions of grandeur. Samad explains to Archie his reasoning behind marrying Alsana, and it is more akin to reconciliation with midlife crisis than the Western idea of love. "Look at me," Samad tells Archie, "Marrying Alsana has given me this new lease on living, you understand? She opens up for me the new possibilities. She's so young, so vital—like a breath of fresh air" (Smith 34). For Samad, Alsana fills a personal void and even enables him to adjust his own view of self to a more comfortable one. He holds this conversation with Archie, in fact, with an advisory tone as if to suggest that Archie should be taking to heart the idea that a wife should be whatever a man needs to feel the way he needs to feel to keep living.

Similarly at a much later point in the novel, Alsana disillusiones Clara of the romantic notions of marriage. Her description can actually be argued as an even less romantic perspective than Samad's, perhaps more cynical. Her explanation to Clara is that they essentially spend too much time deliberately deluding themselves, trying not to examine their husbands too closely for fear of ruining some modicum of mystique still manifesting in their marriages, but Alsana goes further to explain that, at some point, that which is problematic must be examined up close: " So look at it—no, dearie, it must be done—look at it close up. Look at what is left. Samad has one hand; says he wants to find God but the fact is God's given him the slip; and he has been in that curry house for two years already, serving up stringy goat to the whiteys who don't know any better, and Archibald—well, look at the thing close up ..." (Smith 174-5) This demonstrates an even more cynical view. Alsana's perspective on marriage, relative to hers and Clara's, is simply that their husbands are utterly undesirable and that there is nothing worth praising. When she trails off at the end of the quote, she pauses to allow Clara to envision what is problematic about Archie before she finishes, saying, "... folds paper for a living, dear Jesus" (Smith 175).

The problem that arises from comparing these relationships to those that ideally fit the British model of marriage or, more generally, fit Western conventions regarding the ideal marriage is that love is unquantifiable and, perhaps, even unrealistic in the sense that it is a much more uncommon sight than one might expect. The fact that national conceptualization of marriage constructs a model that is not commonly seen means that, of course, the model challenges itself. This is likely one of Smith's points in

writing *White Teeth*. Relationships are spawned haphazardly throughout the book, even across history, and one of the few constants in observing the depicted relationships is that they do not fit the model. People are conventionally mismatched, which applies not just to marriages but all relationships (e. g. that of Chalfens and Bowdens or of Archie and Samad). The chance occurrences of so many of these relationships also speaks to how unlikely Smith suggests it may be for Western tradition's template for love and marriage to be fulfilled because no relationship in the text brings it to fruition. Even the Chalfens themselves serve as more of a fringe rendering of the British model of marriage due to their bizarre, collective independence.

Marriage and love are not shown to be mutually exclusive in the text, nor does Smith imply that one is natural precursor to the other. The novel attacks the Western, traditional expectation that love be the principle on which a marriage is based, and it also attacks the notion that marriage is likely to perpetuate or generate that love after the fact. The question of love and marriage, therefore, irrevocably pits tradition against realism such that the two cannot coincide, and examining this phenomenon leads the reader to presume that their inability to coincide may actually be a natural truth. Traditional, Western expectations of love and marriage assert certain ideas about the abstract concept and its corresponding institution that suggest there is an inexorable correlation, yet Smith's depictions of marriage brazenly chip away at tradition on the basis that there is a time and place for idealism but that asserting romanticized ideas as truth is little more than misleading—a collection of socially constructed falsehoods.