

White teeth: assimilation and identity in postcolonial europe



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Since even before its publication in 2000, Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth* has been surrounded by intense hype and media publicity. Smith's status as a young black female writer who received a quarter million pounds advance on a first book no doubt fueled the frenzy and made her a popular talking point. Today, the majority of audiences and critics would agree that the book lived up to its hype. Translated into over 20 languages, praised by veteran writers and a poet laureate, and adapted into a popular television show, the novel was a major success and the sensational rumors now seem warranted. While Smith's story perhaps was seen as a trendy news piece at first, its investigation of postcolonial European culture and society has made it a serious and important work that aims to make sense of an increasingly complicated, diverse modern world. Smith uses compelling immigrant characters like Bangladeshi Samad Iqbal and his twin sons to explore the difficulties of identity and assimilation in late 20th century Europe, illustrating the need for compromise and understanding in navigating multiculturalism today. As is common for many writers, Zadie Smith took her own experiences into account as inspiration for her fiction. Smith herself is of mixed race and is the daughter of a Jamaican immigrant mother and British father. To be sure though, Smith's background speaks to a larger phenomenon, as it is similar to that of millions of Europeans from this century and the last. According to data collected in 2004, approximately 8.3 percent of the population of Great Britain was born abroad. This number takes into account only foreign-born immigrants and not their children who make up a large and uniquely important part of the population. In her novel, Smith explores the difficulties these groups face in postcolonial Europe where an influx of immigrants occurred in the second half of the 20th

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century from Commonwealth nations such as Jamaica and India. The question of belonging or assimilating into a new society and culture is the crux of Smith's novel, a process that immigrants and their children deal with in vastly different ways. In the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Riva Kastoryano considers how immigrants are theoretically supposed to undergo the assimilation process into a new country. Kastoryano writes the following: The concept of citizenship is mainly defined by membership in a political community, which takes shape through rights (social, political, and cultural) and duties...implies the integration or the incorporation of "foreigners" into a national community theoretically sharing the same moral and political values. Moreover, these foreigners are supposed to adopt, or even "appropriate," historical references as a proof of belonging and of loyalty to a nation's founding principles. Kastoryano outlines these ideas about assimilation commonly held by the hegemony of the ruling society. This view of assimilation defines belonging in a somewhat cold and clinical political sense, as a person changes to become an integrated or incorporated "citizen." For Kastoryano, the native and often socially, culturally, and economically superior class understands assimilation in this simple way. Kastoryano takes issue with this school of thought as it presents the shedding of an old identity and transition into a new community as an easy act. In her novel, specifically through characters like Samad Iqbal, Smith similarly aims to complicate this idea of assimilation and illustrate the difficulties it presents for many individuals. Smith's character Samad Iqbal, World War II veteran and Bangladeshi immigrant, encompasses the struggle of assimilation and the reconciliation of multiple cultures in one individual. Samad's greatest struggle is arguably a moral one. Though he is a Muslim,

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and desires to be a good one at that, he finds it difficult to maintain the tenets of his religion in a secular Britain that is full of temptation. His temptations come in several forms. One is lust for his sons' music teacher, Poppy Burt-Jones. Although Samad is married and does not wish to be unfaithful to his wife and to sin in the eyes of Allah, he cannot help his arousal and eventually succumbs to it, as he has an affair with Poppy. Earlier in his married life, the man grappled with the morality of masturbation, an act he knew to be prohibited in the Islamic faith. He consulted the Alim at his local mosque but ultimately could not abstain, and so he obsessively repeats Islamic prayers and sayings to make up for his transgressions. Samad also fails to meet with the ideals of his native culture in his married life, as his wife Alsana is not the obedient woman that a Muslim man is supposed to have. Finally, Samad is also tempted by alcohol, a vice that he probably would not have to encounter in Bangladesh, in a community of Muslim peers with similar values. Though he cannot honor them, Samad identifies strongly with his Muslim and Bangladeshi roots. In this new land, foreign compared to the home he is accustomed to, he cannot live up to the ideals he was born into. Smith writes: "To Samad, tradition was culture, and culture led to roots, and these were good, these were untainted principles. That didn't mean he could live by them, abide by them or grow in the manner they demanded." It is not his intention to shirk the values of his roots. In reality, he wishes to return to them as he says, "I don't wish to be a modern man! I wish to live as I was always meant to! I wish return to the East." Obviously Samad is unable to do this. One way in which the man attempts to hold on to his roots is through family and history, in the figure of his great grandfather Mangal Pandey. When Kastoryano refers to the appropriation of historical

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references by immigrants, he is probably alluding to examples like Commonwealth nations such as Jamaica whose people felt historically attached to the Motherland of Britain. Samad's case stands very much in contrast to these positive examples as he champions a relative who is symbolic of British oppression and colonial rebellion. Samad uses Pandey not only as a connection to his native roots, but also as a rejection of his new country and a means of fighting his integration or assimilation into it. Another facet of Samad's story that speaks to the complicated nature of the immigrant saga is the development of his twin sons, Millat and Magid. Unhappy with his own ability to be true to his roots in a foreign country, Samad desires that his sons grow to become respectable men by Bangladeshi and Muslim standards. The twins, however, express a desire to live by Westernized British standards early on. Research has shown that children of immigrants, or second-generation children, are much more likely to attain a level of engagement with a new culture than their parents. Both children display this willingness to adapt to the British social-scape quickly. Still, the boys often feel uncertain about their identities and struggle to find a sense of community anywhere. For the twins there is the sense that "underneath it all, there remained an ever-present anger and hurt, the feeling of belonging nowhere that comes to people who belong everywhere." They attempt to find purpose and identity in different ways—by embracing gangster culture, boycotting local festivals, disowning their names. In response to his sons' adolescent rebellions, Samad sends one of them, Magid, back to Bangladesh to be raised in a traditional way, free from the perceived corruption of Britain. Ironically, Magid returns from his father's homeland an atheist, science student, "more English than the English." Here <https://assignbuster.com/white-teeth-assimilation-and-identity-in-postcolonial-europe/>

it seems Smith is simultaneously criticizing and sympathizing with her characters. She recognizes a father's tragic desire to see his sons brought up in his own family traditions, but also points at Samad's unwillingness to adapt or compromise—a necessity for not only the success of an immigrant, but of anyone clinging to the past in a sometimes aggressively modern world. Smith's personal experiences, coupled with her obvious insight into an increasingly diverse and complicated world, have allowed her to weave a story that unabashedly examines the issues of immigration and assimilation. While it may have been media hype that set off her book's popularity, its prominence as an important text that speaks to themes past and present in European lives (an American ones, for that matter) is by no means unfounded. In *White Teeth*, Smith uses her many-layered, dynamic characters such as Samad and his sons to present the difficulties of the immigrant experience—from internal struggles to family battles to attaining meaningful membership in a community—and stresses the importance of compromise and understanding in these modern times of immense diversity and differences.