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## The Ambiguous British Self in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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# Index

Introduction .....	1
1. Individual and National Identity: an Overview.....	5
1.1 Selfhood and Individual Identity .....	5
1.2 The Construction of National Identities: the Case of Englishness .....	14
1.3 Zadie Smith’s <i>White Teeth</i> : an “audaciously contribution to [the] process of staring into the mirror” <sup>1</sup> .....	18
2. Britishness’ Various Selves in Zadie Smith’s <i>White Teeth</i> : an Analysis of the Novel’s Characters .....	25
2.1 Introduction .....	25
2.2 Ancestry and Historical Roots .....	27
2.2.1 Samad’s relationship to his ancestry and past history .....	27
2.2.2 Irie’s relationship to her genealogical roots.....	33
2.2.3 Comparing and Contrasting Samad’s and Irie’s attitudes .....	39

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<sup>1</sup> Caryl Philips, quoted in Head, 107

2.3 Racial Heritage .....	40
2.3.1 Irie's Relationship to her Racial Heritage.....	40
2.4 Cultural Heritage .....	43
2.4.1 Clara's Rebellion to Hortense's Religious Heritage.....	44
2.4.2 Magid's and Millat's Response to their Father's Islamic Faith.	49
2.4.3 Joshua's Rebellion to Chalfenism.....	57
2.5 Socially and Genetically Constructed Heritage .....	62
2.5.1 Joyce's Experiment of a Socially Constructed Heritage .....	63
2.5.2 Marcus Chalfen's FutureMouse Project: a Genetically Constructed Heritage.....	68
2.6 Archibald, the FutureMouse and Irie's Child: the Predominance of Chance and Ambivalence over Certainty and Determinism .....	74
2.7 Conclusion .....	79
3.The Ambiguity and Fragmentation of <i>White Teeth</i> 's Form	81
3.1 Introduction .....	81
3.2 The Realist Mode.....	82
3.2.1 An Attempt to Define Realism .....	82
3.2.2 Realist Effects within <i>White Teeth</i> .....	88

3.3 The Modernist Mode .....	99
3.3.1 Free Indirect Speech .....	100
3.3.2 Ending .....	103
3.3.3 The Rejection of Linearity .....	105
3.4 <i>White Teeth</i> : a Spatialized Novel.....	111
3.4.1 The Disruption of Chronological Sequence Explained through Joseph Frank’s Theory of Spatial Form.....	111
3.4.2 Spatialized Elements within <i>White Teeth</i> .....	116
3.4.3 The Removal of Temporal Elements as a Response to 20 <sup>th</sup> - Century Cultural Context.....	132
3.4.4 The Removal of Temporality in <i>White Teeth</i> : the Perception of Time as a Continuum.....	137
3.5 Conclusion .....	139
Conclusion.....	144
Bibliography.....	150

# Introduction

This thesis analyses Zadie Smith's successful debut novel, *White Teeth*, published in 2000 and immediately acclaimed as an editorial success (Jakubiak, 201). The novel is set in London and narrates the story of three families, the Iqbals, the Joneses and the Chalfens, going through the happenings which have occurred in the life of their components throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By focusing especially on the second half of the century, the novel points out the main transformations England, and London in particular, have undergone both socially and culturally from the 1950s onwards. Many of the changes England has gone through appear to be a consequence of the End of the Empire. Thus, it is not a coincidence that the components of two of the three families portrayed by Smith come from England's former colonies or are mixed-race. Furthermore, the components of the third family depicted by Smith, the Chalfens, are not as English as they seem either: in fact, despite being born and brought up in England, they descend from German and Polish immigrants; consequently, they reveal to be hybrid too (Smith, 328). Hence, Smith's characters mirror England's changing social environment, which, especially after decolonization, has become increasingly multiethnic and multicultural (see Marzola, 199).

The members of the families portrayed by Zadie Smith inevitably interact with individuals who do not belong to their family unit, thereby being exposed to several different values, ideals and beliefs at a time. Smith's characters, however, being unable to negotiate between past and present, are haunted by the simultaneous presence of the values they have inherited from their family and values they have acquired in the country of arrival. Therefore, as a consequence

of their condition of postcolonial subjects, they find it difficult to negotiate between past and present beliefs.

Not only are Smith's characters simultaneously exposed to opposing values as a consequence of their condition of 'postcolonial selves'; they are subjected to different ideals as a result of postmodernity too (see Bauman 2012a, 13). However, instead of embracing the new acquired values and attempting to negotiate them along with their previous ideals, Smith's characters tend to reject either the old or the new values, and strive to determine coherent identities and unambiguous lives (see Paproth, 9). Therefore, despite living in a postmodern world, which is increasingly unpredictable and ambivalent, Smith's characters behave as if the condition of postmodernity had not fully substituted that of modernity (see Bauman 1991, 173). In fact, they still try to determine for themselves an unambiguous identity and life (Childs, 211), even though coherency is no longer possible in a postmodern, postcolonial world (see Bauman 1991, 173).

On the basis of the issues *White Teeth* deals with, Smith's novel can be said to have contributed to representing the British *self* living in a postmodern and postcolonial world. In addition, by depicting the changes England, and London in particular, have gone through, the novel has also helped the UK to "[stare] into the mirror" (Philips, quoted in Head, 107): perhaps unsurprisingly, in fact, the image of London which emerges from Smith's novel is extremely multicultural (Head, 106). Consequently, it is not only the British self which has changed; the current environment of London implies that England and its national identity have been modified too. The effects of the Empire can thus not be underestimated; as a consequence of decolonization, in fact, many people belonging to the Empire's former colonies decided to move to England, thereby determining, throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its present multicultural shape (Marzola, 199). Therefore, "Englishness" itself is in need of

a revision in light of the transformations English society has undergone (see Bentley, 497).

The aim of this thesis is thus to consider how Smith's novel has contributed to revising the representation of the British self and, consequently, of Englishness. The first chapter considers individual and national identity in the light of postmodernity and post-colonialism. Postmodernity and post-colonialism appear in fact to have relevant implications for the construction of both subjective and national identity: on the one hand, identity lacks the stability and coherence it used to possess (see Bauman 1991, 173); on the other hand, identities are becoming increasingly hybrid. Therefore, the first chapter highlights the transformations both subjective and national identity have gone through as a consequence of postmodernity and post-colonialism. When analysing Smith's novel these two factors need thus to be taken into account. In addition, this first chapter also suggests that identity issues not only are dealt with through the novel's topics, but through the novel's form too. Thus, identity issues emerge through both the novel's subject matter and form. This aspect is only hinted at in the first chapter, and further developed in the second and third chapter, which focus, respectively, on the novel's thematic contents and form.

As previously mentioned, the second chapter focuses on *White Teeth*'s main themes, and points out the characters' difficulty in accepting incoherent identities and existences. Depending on their personal story, they strive to achieve a coherency and stability which postmodernity and post-colonialism do not seem to guarantee (see Bauman, 1991, 173). Therefore, they constantly try to determine a stable identity and life, eliminating any aspect which may create ambivalence (Childs, 211). Their efforts, however, are continuously frustrated. Perhaps not surprisingly, the characters who do not attempt to shape their existence eventually become more successful than those who constantly strive to stabilize it (see Bentley, 498, 500). Towards the end of the chapter, on the evidence of the novel's themes, it is also suggested that, if the British self has

become increasingly ambiguous, Englishness itself cannot be defined coherently either (Mirze, 200). Therefore, such an ambiguous British self appears to have implications for a traditional representation of Englishness, which requires thus to be revised, negotiating between established and emergent forms of identity (Bentley, 498).

The third and last chapter focuses on form. Even though it may be detected less easily, form itself may be said to contribute to redefining identity, both subjective and national (see Bentley, 488). To begin with, *White Teeth* is based on the simultaneous use of realism and modernism, which determines the novel's formal ambivalence (see Bentley, 497). Therefore, as happens with individual and national identity, the form of *White Teeth* is not homogeneous; conversely, clashing aspects such as realism and modernism coexist within the same literary work (see Bentley, 497). Furthermore, as a consequence of the disruption of the novel's linearity, which is a typically modernist feature, *White Teeth's* form is not only ambivalent but fragmented too (see Stevenson, 92). Therefore, as happens with the British self and Englishness, the novel is composed of several fragments. These fragments, however, despite their discontinuity, constitutes Smith's novel as an entity, just as they do when constituting identity.

On the evidence of the novel's form and thematic contents, Zadie Smith seems to imply that in a postmodern and post-colonial world ambivalence and fragmentation inevitably characterize both individual and national identity, which consequently need a revision and negotiation, since homogeneity and uniformity can be no longer achieved (Mirze, 200). Therefore, this thesis points out the contribution *White Teeth* provides, in both its subject matter and form, to the representation of the ambiguous British self and multicultural England, thereby concretely helping the UK to "[stare] into the mirror" (Philips, quoted in Head, 106).

# 1. Individual and National Identity: an Overview

## 1.1 Selfhood and Individual Identity

Nowadays selfhood is frequently sensed as a private issue; considering selfhood in a critical way, however, involves evaluating the outside world too (Elliott, 4). The self is in fact always influenced by external factors: despite the fact that individuals, as pointed out by some sociologists, may actively shape their own experience, in doing so they still make use of social and cultural elements (Elliott, 5). As a result, one's feelings and beliefs upon himself are conditioned by cultural and social components (Elliott, 5). The individual may simultaneously influence and structure social life through self-experience and understandings (Elliott, 9). Thus, by drawing upon its personal experience, the self continuously provides self-interpretations concerning not only itself but the rest of society too (Elliott, 9). On the basis of its relation with the external world, it seems that the self needs to be studied in relation to society rather than in isolation from it (Elliott, 9). The relationship between the self and the outside world is thus central to the understanding of selfhood (Elliott, 7). The self is thus internally constituted by both self-experience and those historical, political, cultural and social contexts in which the self itself is inserted (Elliott, 10). Therefore, individual identity is a construction of both "private and public, personal and political, individual and historical": external factors and internal resources should thus be weighed equally when analyzing the self and identity (Elliott, 11).

In order to understand today's notion of selfhood, it would thus be useful to consider first the transformations the self has undergone throughout the last

half-century. The decade of peacefulness and security, which followed the Second World War, was soon replaced by the age of the Vietnam War, decolonization, feminism, civil rights movements and sexual revolution (Elliott, 16). The notions of selfhood and individual identity were consequently challenged: the self was no longer associated with “images of sameness, continuity, regularity and repetition” as it used to (Elliott, 15-16) and an age of ‘identity crisis’<sup>2</sup> opened (Elliott, 16).

The crisis the notion of identity went through, however, does not seem a coincidence, since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is characterized by the rise of postmodernity (Bauman 1991b, 173). In order to understand nowadays notion of selfhood, it seems thus indispensable to take into account factors such as globalization, migration and multiculturalism, which appear to have reshaped the relationship between the self and the social world in the last half century (Elliott, 19, 22).

In particular, globalization seems to have led the path to postmodernity, consequently reshaping nowadays societies and the self significantly (Bauman 1998, 299; Elliott, 19): being globalization the factor responsible for the passage from modernity to postmodernity, it thus appears to have deeply influenced the self and the construction of identity (Bauman 1998, 299). It would thus be useful to carefully consider the changes globalization has determined, in order to highlight the differences between a modern and postmodern condition, and to consequently understand the transformations the self has undergone.

Modernity emerged throughout the eighteenth century and fully manifested itself in the nineteenth century (Bauman 1991b, 173). It used to be characterized by the desire to maintain order, whose pursuit began to trouble human beings when they discovered that order is neither stable nor fixed, but is susceptible to change (Bauman 1993, 165; Bauman 1992, 192). As a consequence, modern men strived “to make order solid, obligatory and reliably

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<sup>2</sup> The term was coined by Erik Erikson

founded” (Bauman, 1992, 192). Chance and spontaneity were thus eliminated to prevent them from challenging the vulnerable order (Bauman 1992, 192). Ambivalence and incongruity were eradicated too, since they both eluded a strict definition (Bauman 1991a, 287). Modernity thus tended to rationalize all aspects of both private and public life and any irrational element was consequently suppressed (Bauman 1993, 167-168). On the evidence of this, it appears that the discovery of the vulnerability of order coincided with the recognition of the mutability of existence (Bauman 1992, 192-193). It may thus be claimed that the most distinctive feature of modernity consists in the belief that order is a human construction, consequently destined to remain an unnatural and vulnerable creation, requiring a continuous monitoring (Bauman 1992, 196). Since order is artificial and consequently unstable, it follows that the pursuit of order is a constant struggle for “determination against ambiguity” (Bauman 1991a, 286).

Order is difficult to achieve since there are elements which always appear out of place: wherever they are, they do not seem to occupy a suitable place (Bauman 2007a, 5). These aspects seem in fact to ignore boundaries, and consequently subvert the fragile man-made order, which cannot be maintained unless men supervise it (Bauman 1992, 196; Bauman 2007a, 5-6). As a consequence, the modern man tends to get rid of these disturbing elements to maintain order (Bauman 2007a, 5). Therefore, even though there are elements which constantly appear disordered, during the modern age human beings have constantly attempted to maintain order, which involves regularity and predictability: in fact, if the world is ordered, events do not occur casually, and human beings can consequently understand the reality occurring around them (Bauman 2007a, 6).

Just as the order they want to shape in the external world, modern men feel the need to construct a stable subjective identity (Bauman 2007a, 24). The external order, pursued during modernity, appears thus indispensable to allow the modern self to construct a coherent identity: in fact, order guarantees a stable

and reliable backdrop to human beings' actions and life and to the self's efforts to determine its identity (Bauman 2007a, 24). Therefore, the modern self is obsessed with the desire to control and frame its identity; consequently, it is tormented by stability and reliability (Bauman, quoted in Elliott, 153-154).

The social condition of postmodernity, on the other hand, which emerged throughout the twentieth century and took a definite shape in the second half of the century, does not provide the individual with stable certainties (Bauman 1991, 173; Bauman 2007a, 25). Postmodernity is actually characterized by "pluralism, variety, contingency and ambivalence" (Bauman 1991, 173), the very same values modernity strived to eliminate (Bauman 1991, 174).

As previously mentioned, such a changed condition seems to be determined by globalization, which has disrupted the order that modernity difficultly attempted to achieve and maintain (Bauman 1998, 299). If during the modern age order and stability used to be constructed and maintained by the state, globalization has turned nation-states ineffective and each country's affairs have become disorderly and undefined (Bauman 1998, 299-300). As a consequence of globalization, each society is now increasingly open, both economically and culturally (Bauman 2007b, 6). If once 'openness'<sup>3</sup> only alluded to the societies' awareness of their lack of completeness, now the term also implies the impotence societies experience when attempting to determine their trajectory, and the difficulties they have in maintaining the path chosen (Bauman 2007b, 6-7). An open society is today exposed to chance, therefore 'openness' is today considered a drawback of globalization (Bauman 2007b, 7).

In a globalized world as our own, decisions can be taken neither by relying on a country's forces alone, nor by ignoring what is occurring in the world: being each predicament global, it cannot be resolved locally (Bauman 2007b, 7, 25). It follows that nation-states are more and more disconnected from their power, since the effects of globalization cannot be controlled politically

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'openness' was coined by Karl Popper

(Bauman 2007b, 13, 25). Nations' decreased power inevitably implies the reshaping of the role of politicians too: even though they have not disappeared from the scene, they have lost the centrality they used to have (Khosrokhavar, 22). Institutions and politicians' diminished power seems thus to be provoked precisely by globalization (Khosrokhavar, 22).

Having states and politicians lost their power, individuals have been left alone to try to find answers to a disordered world (Bauman 2007b, 14). Since the institutions are no longer able to guarantee protection to their citizens (Bauman 2007b, 25), the postmodern self cannot rely any longer on them and consequently lacks the certainties the modern self used to have (Khosrokhavar, 18). The void which has originated is thus faced by the individual as a subject rather than as a social actor (Khosrokhavar, 23). Human beings may consequently feel abandoned to themselves, since they are exposed to global forces they can neither influence nor regulate (Khosrokhavar, 18-19; Bauman 2007b, 25). If once the only obstacles the self may have fought against in order to construct its identity were of social derivation, today the incapability of the institutions to deal with the current situation actually leaves the self facing global forces it can actually not control (Khosrokhavar, 18-19). Identity itself is consequently at risk and individuals constantly experience internal conflicts as a consequence of the lack of secure points of reference (Khosrokhavar, 19). Thus, individuals' incapability to reach stability and order inevitably foments fears concerning both their present and their future (Bauman 2007b, 26). Despite feeling vulnerable and insecure, however, the individual is never entirely lost; in fact, it appears that, even though external certainties such as institutions, norms and religion weaken, internal principles strengthen (Touraine, 96).

Nonetheless, on the basis of the condition of postmodernity, it may be claimed that the construction of identity cannot rely on a secure environment after globalization (Bauman 2007a, 25). The instability of a disordered, ambivalent and unpredictable world prevents in fact the individual from shaping

a coherent identity (Bauman 2007a, 26). The world in which the self lives is in fact “full of opportunities” (Bauman 2012b, 62); however, even though the possibility to choose and shape the future personally may be attractive, it also provokes anxieties, due to the lack of determination, completeness and stability (Bauman 2012b, 62). Therefore, the life of postmodern men is destined to remain “a mixed blessing”: on the one hand, there are endless possibilities; on the other hand, infinite choices determine uncertainty and fears (Bauman 2012b, 87). In addition, this dichotomy can be referred to identity: on the one hand, the self is in the position to shape his own identity; on the other hand, it may experience anxieties (Bauman 2012b, 83).

The postmodern self is thus characterized by a lack of stability and solidity (Elliott, 154). Hence, life in postmodernity is increasingly uncertain and the individual finds himself to face ambivalent questions which he did not have to handle before (Bauman, quoted in Elliott, 156). On the basis of a postmodern society dominated by uncertainty, today’s self would be expected to be more tolerant towards ambivalence (Elliott, 158). However, the world sometimes changes so rapidly that the self is overwhelmed by the technological and social transformations and its capability to tolerate ambiguity weakens (Elliott, 158). Hence, despite the changed situation, human beings may sometimes still feel the need to control the construction of their own identity; thus, despite the external world’s unpredictability, the attempt to determine and control one’s identity does not appear to be unusual in a postmodern world (Bauman 2007a, 32). This attitude can explain why the postmodern self is usually anxious about the construction of its identity and tends to fear unstable components of life (Bauman 2007a, 32). Such an individual consequently appears the opposite of the postmodern self, since he does not seem to endure instability or ambiguity and his relationship with other selves is characterized by attempts of manipulation and control (Elliott, 158-159).

The postmodern self is however required to accept ambivalence and coexist with it (Bauman 2007a, 38). Identity, in fact, cannot be fixed, otherwise it would prevent the self from adapting to the changes a mutable world like the postmodern one is characterized by (Bauman 2007a, 32). Postmodern selves seem thus to progressively understand that uncertainties cannot be reduced but rather need to be accepted (Bauman 2007a, 26). It follows that in postmodernity order slowly begins not to be considered a priority (Bauman 2007a, 13). Therefore, if on the one hand nation-states cannot guarantee order any longer, since decisions cannot be taken locally but need to take into account the globalized world, on the other hand the quest for a stable order, which has characterized modernity, appears to decrease (Bauman 2007a, 14). Uncertainty and ambiguity, which are characteristic of both public and private life, begin not to be considered disturbing elements in postmodernity, but rather “unavoidable and ineradicable” components of human life, which cannot be eliminated through rationality (Bauman 1993, 171).

Alongside with globalization, another factor which appears to have affected the postmodern self, and the construction of its identity, is the progressive abandonment of transcendental beliefs (Touraine, 101). Even though individuals have long been guided by religion, reason and history, after the Second World War transcendence has been abandoned since it can no longer deal with the material world (Touraine, 101). The failure of transcendental beliefs has consequently permitted the individual to discover the existence of an unstable reality: in fact, once transcendence is abandoned, there is no order left (Touraine, 101, 110); actually, some components are inevitably destined to remain conflicting (Touraine, 93). According to Touraine, however, the subject can be created precisely when the individual distances itself from transcendental beliefs: therefore, even though the disappearance of the norms which used to guarantee stability appears to be partly responsible for the self’s frailty, instability appears necessary in order to allow the individual to become a subject

(Touraine, 93, 96). Nowadays every subject seems to be characterized by instability: due to its relationship with itself, the subject is constantly living in a state of uncertainty and anxiety (Touraine, 117). If it once believed in transcendental aspects such as history, God or the spirit, it now seems to be disoriented (Touraine, 117). However, a disoriented subject can ultimately diminish his anxieties by thinking that crisis and instability are necessary in order to achieve individuality and singularity (Touraine, 96, 118).

On the evidence of both globalization and the abandonment of transcendence, nowadays selfhood does not seem to be invariable but rather appears to be constantly modified (Bauman 2012a, 11). This is not a coincidence since in postmodernity identity is continuously exposed to change: each human being is in fact simultaneously subjected to different principles, which may also be in contradiction with one another (Bauman 2012a, 13). As a consequence, individuals have difficulties in describing the development of their identity, since it does not appear to progress coherently, but rather seems to lack “consistency and continuity” (Bauman 2012a, 13). Being identity continuously exposed to change, the individual consequently feels the need to protect his identity from the risks transformations involve; nevertheless, the result of the confrontation within and between individuals is inevitably destined to be a negotiation (Bauman 2012a, 13). If the postmodern self familiarizes with and learns to accept the ambivalence which is characteristic of his condition, the encounter with different ideals may perhaps be less disturbing (Bauman 2012a, 13-14). It may thus be claimed that human beings are not provided with a fixed, permanent identity, but rather need to construct their identity through never-ending struggles (Bauman 2012a, 15-16). The struggle faced by human beings is never-ending since claiming that a definite identity can be reached would involve denying identity’s unstable and temporary status, which cannot be hidden as it used to (Bauman 2012a, 16).

When identity used to be anchored socially, it appeared “predetermined and non-negotiable” (Bauman 2012a, 24). However, the precariousness of its status cannot be concealed any longer (Bauman 2012a, 16). In a world in which identity is constantly challenged and new alternatives are continuously offered, individuals’ efforts to establish definite identities would simply not work (Bauman 2012a, 27). In a postmodern world like our own, individuals need to construct their identity by negotiating the alternatives their identity is exposed to and by balancing the different components their identity is ultimately composed of (Bauman 2012a, 26-27). If on the one hand uncertainty may provoke anxieties; on the other hand attempting to maintain a fixed identity does not appear to be desirable either in a postmodern world (Bauman 2012a, 29). It follows that ambivalence cannot be entirely removed, despite human beings’ efforts, and identity can thus not be fixed: therefore, “being on the move” appears to be indispensable in postmodernity (Bauman 2012a, 31). Identity cannot be maintained permanently but needs to be continuously modified while moving forwards (Bauman 2012a, 26).

In conclusion, it is possible to claim that selfhood is a construction resulting from the interconnection between the self’s inner world and the social, cultural and political contexts in which the self is inserted (Elliott, 166). Further, as a response to external upheavals, selfhood changes accordingly, as proved by today’s self, which is continuously transformed by the increasingly challenging social conditions and historical and cultural processes which make individuals’ life increasingly fragmented and uncertain (Elliott, 166, 172).

Globalization, in particular, is one of the factors which have significantly transformed the self and its identity: it is in fact considered to have provoked the passage from modernity to postmodernity (Bauman 1998, 299; Elliott, 19). If during modernity the order of the outside world, which was maintained by nation-states, allowed the self to construct its identity coherently (Bauman 1993, 165; Bauman 1998, 299; Bauman 2007a, 24), the condition of postmodernity

does not provide the self with certainties, since politicians and institutions have become ineffective (Bauman 2007a, 25; Bauman 1998, 299-300). The individual is thus left alone (Bauman 2007b, 14): if on the one hand the infinite possibilities he is exposed to may be inviting, on the other hand they tend to arouse fears (Bauman 2012b, 87). Since fears tend to prevail, the postmodern self's efforts to control its own identity are still common (Bauman 2007a, 32). These attempts, however, are rather pointless, since the distinctive features of postmodernity are ambivalence and instability (Bauman 2012a, 27; Bauman 1993, 171). In addition to globalization, a further factor which appears to have made the postmodern man realise that the world is disordered, is represented by the abandonment of transcendental beliefs: the self is consequently exposed to further instability (Touraine, 101, 110).

Therefore, if the condition of the postmodern self is characterized by uncertainty and instability, the self cannot be defined coherently as it used to (Bauman 2012a, 16). Thus, identity needs to be constructed by negotiating the alternatives it is exposed to and by balancing the different components it is composed of (Bauman 2012a, 13). Consequently, identity is not invariable but is continuously modified and negotiated while moving forwards (Bauman 2012a, 26).

## 1.2 The Construction of National Identities: the Case of Englishness

A transformation to be taken into account when analyzing the self is that nowadays identity is mentioned more and more often when referring to political issues (Gilroy, 224). The change in its use can be noticed by observing the term 'cultural identity' which has been coined recently and which refers to the

influence of culture in shaping identity and to its relationship to power (Gilroy, 224).

Let us begin by considering the concept of cultural identity. Cultural identity can be defined according to two different models which have been conveyed by Hall (2003, 234). The first model describes cultural identity as one single culture shared by people who have a same history or ancestry (Hall 2003, 234). Hence, despite the many superficial dissimilarities amongst each one's history and culture, such a way of thinking cultural identity highlights communal roots (Hall 2003, 234). However, there is a second way of thinking cultural identity, which, despite recognizing the existence of common experiences, argues that, due to the intervention of history, there are also aspects which differ radically from one another and which constitutes "ruptures and discontinuities" within a common experience (Hall 2003, 236). Hence, such a model considers cultural identity constituted by both similarity and difference, continuity and rupture (Hall 2003, 237). Thus, it acknowledges that cultural identities not only consist in a process of being, but also of becoming: therefore, this second model seems to suggest that cultural identity is not fixed but is continuously altered and transformed (Hall 2003, 236).

Having examined the two different ways of thinking cultural identity, let us now move on to consider the connection between culture and power: cultural and political issues can thus be connected by using the concept of identity (Gilroy, 224- 225). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in relation to colonial history, cultural identities have been exploited politically in order to depict a nation as a uniform cultural entity inhabited by almost identical beings: this process aimed to determine a country's boundaries and to shape its national identity (Gilroy, 225). Further, in order to legitimize one country's colonial interests and actions, cultural identity has also been deployed to shape the identity of colonized as different from its own (Marzola, 60). In fact, it is through its relation to what is other that one country can assert and consolidate

its own identity (Marzola, 33). In order to do so, the identity of the colonized tended to be unified without considering the cultural and racial differences existing amongst the various populations (Marzola, 61). Therefore, it is possible to claim that national identities have usually been shaped according to Hall's first model, by highlighting the common historical and cultural roots rather than the existing differences within the subjugated populations (see Marzola, 61). However, it is only Hall's second model which would account for the traumatic experience of colonialism: according to this second model, the identity of the colonized would not be considered as an immutable entity which transcends time and place; but rather as an entity which is constantly transformed (Hall 2003, 236-237). Therefore, it cannot represent a stable or undifferentiated origin or experience to which migrants can return or can be said to belong (Hall 2003, 236-237).

English national identity, which is referred to by using the term Englishness<sup>4</sup>, is no exception; it was in fact constructed according to Hall's first model of cultural identity (see Marzola, 61). Throughout the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, England's political and economic loss of power and supremacy made it necessary to rethink and reshape Englishness (Marzola, 55-56). In order to do so and reassert its own identity and supremacy, England highlighted the otherness of other populations, especially of the colonized (Marzola, 56). Colonialism played in fact a fundamental role in the definition of Englishness: being the colonized racially and culturally different, they seemed to represent the ideal subject in relation and opposition to which Englishness could be defined (Marzola, 60). The representation of cultural identity, and consequently of national identity, is thus based on the construction of a representation of the other (Marzola, 60).

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<sup>4</sup> The term Englishness indicates all those discourses which define what means to be English and which are English ideals and ideologies (Marzola, 32)

After World War II England was even more forced to reshape its national identity as a consequence of post-war economic crisis and the increasingly insistent claim for independence from part of the colonies (Marzola, 197). As a consequence of decolonization, which led the path to post-colonialism, the relationship of the former colonies with England gradually changed, developing in the colonized ambivalent feelings: on the one hand they wanted to claim the autonomy of their own cultural identity, on the other hand they felt a strong bond to their former motherland (Marzola, 199). Due to this sense of ambivalence and to the economic and political instability of the emerging independent nations, from the 1950s onwards waves of migrations developed to the UK, shaping an increasingly multicultural and multiethnic environment (Marzola, 199). However, precisely as a consequence of the increased presence of migrants in England, racist manifestations spread and several Immigration Acts had to be introduced in order to deal with the issue of racial integration (Marzola, 199-200).

Further, throughout the 1980s, in order to revive national identity, Margaret Thatcher attempted to reestablish England as an unalterable national and cultural centre, ignoring the cultural changes which had taken place within the nation (Marzola, 250). In order to provide a nostalgic and mythicized vision of England's past and to reshape Englishness, Margaret Thatcher recouped many of the stereotypes used to define English national identity by distinguishing it from the former colonized populations (Marzola, 253).

To sum up, it is evident that cultural identity was exploited politically by England in order to shape its national identity, especially by distinguishing it from the colonies (Marzola, 56). After World War II, however, the notion of Englishness was challenged because of decolonization and independence, which were followed by waves of migration to the heart of the former Empire (Marzola, 199). Nevertheless, immigrants, despite being born British citizens for their belonging to the Empire, were still marked as other (Amine, 74; McMann,

623). Thus, it is not surprising to discover that throughout Thatcher's administration there was still the attempt to define Englishness by marking its difference from the identity of former colonies (Marzola, 253).

On the basis of this, it appears that the end of the Empire pushed Britain to cope with the issue of redefining its national identity (Head, 107). Transformations such as decolonization and migration led in fact the path to post-colonialism. However, it appears that postcolonial Britain still has difficulties in accepting its past history, especially as far as its colonial past and heritage are concerned: therefore, the remarkable colonial history which has characterized the country still affects Britain today (Beukema, 1). As a consequence, since Britain finds it difficult to bear the actions which were enacted in its name and their consequences, it tends to repress or reshape its colonial past (Bentley, 487). However, the current multicultural and multiethnic society, which is a consequence of decolonization and migration, keeps reminding Britain of its postcolonial condition (Bentley, 488) As a result, Britain appears to be "still fighting to find a way to stare into the mirror" (Philips quoted in Head, 107). It is perhaps not surprising that many books, both fictional and non-fictional, have recently dealt with English national identity while trying to investigate, define or delineate it, all agreeing on the transformation that the concept of Englishness has undergone (Bentley, 483).

### 1.3 Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*: an "audaciously contribution to [the] process of staring into the mirror"<sup>5</sup>

One of the many fictional works, which have contributed to revisiting both the British contemporary self and English national identity by portraying

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<sup>5</sup> Caryl Philips, quoted in Head, 107

Britain's 20<sup>th</sup>-century society, is Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* (Head, 106-107). By contemplating the dynamics of 20<sup>th</sup>-century multicultural London and the many changes which have occurred within a postmodern world, Smith's work of fiction appears to be committed to reconsider and reassess a traditional construction of both individual and national identity (see Bentley, 501).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, when portraying the British contemporary self and the present shape of Englishness, England's unresolved problems with its colonial history cannot be ignored (see Beukema, 1). However, *White Teeth*'s subject matter does not focus primarily on England's colonial history, but on the individual and his interaction with the past (Bentley, 499). In doing so, Smith stresses the impact the legacies of colonialism have on the construction of identity (Bentley, 499). Thus, Smith portrays the way in which the implications of England's colonial past are felt in the construction of identity by immigrants, their descendants and Englishmen (Bentley, 499; Head, 116).

Not only does the legacy of colonialism affect the life of Smith's characters, also postmodernity has an impact on the construction of their identity. As a consequence of these external factors, in fact, Smith's characters are simultaneously exposed to several different values (see Bauman 2012a, 26-27). However, Smith's characters do not manage to bear ambivalent identities and lives (Paproth, 9). Consequently, they find it intolerable to live in a fractured postmodern and postcolonial world because of their inability to handle the unpredictability and ambiguity of life (Paproth, 9-10). Thus, when experiencing conflicts both within and between themselves, Smith's characters try to control their own and others' life in order to determine coherent identities based on one aspect or concept, without accepting ambivalence (Childs, 211; Thompson, 123). However, despite their attempts to control identity and their pursuit of stable and certain truths, they find themselves stuck between essentialisms (Paproth, 9-10).

In addition, the conflicts they experience are left unresolved: Smith appears thus unwilling to provide a solution to the conflicting process which is thought to lead to the constitution of identity; conversely, she seems precisely to highlight the obstacles her characters find and need to cope with in a postcolonial and postmodern world (Beukema, 1). The author's position seems thus to stress the uselessness of a quest for a unique origin and stable identity (Thompson, 133): in fact, the British contemporary self, just as any postmodern and postcolonial self, is increasingly fragmented (see Bauman 2007a, 26). Even though Smith's characters have difficulties in negotiating the different components of their lives, as a consequence of their inability to accept ambivalence, negotiation seems to be of fundamental importance within the world in which they live: the contact between roots and routes necessarily requires a negotiation in order to shape identity and to interact with others (Beukema, 1). Therefore, a negotiation appears to be essential when dealing with the issue of identity formation and consequently also with one's relationship with others (Thompson, 133, 135).

Despite focusing primarily on the ambivalent British contemporary self, by narrating the story of cultural, familial and intergenerational conflicts both within and between its characters, Smith's novel has implications for England's national identity too, which should be rethought taking into account the transformations English society has gone through in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Thompson, 123; Bentley, 501). The idea that a hybrid Britishness has always existed is suggested precisely through the novel's subject matter, by uncovering the continuous exchanges and proximity between the motherland and the colonized populations (Amine, 77). The idea of postcolonial hybridity is also conveyed through Alsana Iqbal (Groß, 40). By claiming that "[i]t's still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe" she asks her husband Samad: "Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It's a fairy-tale!" (Smith, 236). On the evidence of Alsana's speech, the

hybridity of English national identity is proved by demonstrating that the British self is a hybrid postcolonial both biologically and culturally (Head, 114). In fact, when leaving his homeland, in the past as well as today, an immigrant brings with him a part of the culture which is characteristic of his own country (Eliot, quoted in Bhabha 1996, 54). This partial culture constitutes the “contaminated yet connective” tie between cultures, which allows immigrants to construct their own culture, historic memory and sense of community within dynamics of political hostility: therefore, that ordinary partial culture should permit the coexistence of both origins and new forms of living (Bhabha 1996, 58). Therefore, since “we are all hybrid post-colonials”, a quest for pure, cohesive roots is rather useless (Head, 114). It follows that the search for a coherent identity is pointless not only for individuals but for national identity too (see Head, 114).

The ambivalent condition of the British contemporary self and of English national identity is suggested not only through *White Teeth*'s subject matter. The heterogeneity and fragmentation of both individual and national identity is implied through the form of Smith's novel too, which combines realist and modernist features (Bentley, 498, 501).

*White Teeth* may be said to be “partly nineteenth century in the inspiration for its form” (Lowe quoted in Tew, 61). The novel focuses in fact on everyday life activities and on ordinary people, which tend to be described realistically (see Bertoni, 315). Smith's fiction is made even more realistic by the insertion of historical episodes, which contribute to making the narrative more reliable (see Bertoni, 315). A further element which can be linked to realism consists in the use of a third person omniscient narrator, from whose perspective the story is usually narrated (Bentley, 498). Further, the narrative voice tends to be concealed: impersonality is thus widely deployed by Smith, thereby making her novel more realistic (see Bertoni, 331). In addition, *White Teeth* can be classified as a realist novel since its characters can be recognized socially and

live in an identifiable suburb located in north-west London, which is called Willesden (Bentley, 497; Tew, 51). Further, not only is space described concretely, but time is clearly delimited too: every chapter focuses in fact on two specific years (Paproth, 10). Hence, it appears that, while the subject matter rejects any effort to determine and control identity without accepting ambivalence, the form relies precisely on those traditional structures Smith is criticizing by claiming their impracticality within a postmodernist and postcolonial world in which both meaning and boundaries are constantly transformed and made unstable (Paproth, 11).

However, the traditionally realist structure is challenged through modernist devices. The realist form is defied by focusing, as modernists do, on the characters' inner world rather than on the outside world (see Stevenson, 64). Hence, this appears to be the reason why Smith gives voice to her characters' thoughts and inner conflicts, by deploying, for instance, free indirect speech (see Stevenson, 14). In addition, the realist literary tradition appears to be challenged also through Smith's open ending: like many modernist novels, *White Teeth* does not offer its readers a definite ending as 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels used to (see Stevenson, 158). Further, just as modernists, Smith tends to fragment the narrative of *White Teeth*, in order not to narrate her characters' story according to a chronological order (see Stevenson, 91).

It is possible to suggest that the deployment of a form which oscillates between realism and modernism might be connected to Smith's effort to constitute a new model of national identity (Bentley, 497-498). In fact, if Bhabha's reflections on the relationship between literary form and national identity are considered, not only is realism challenged, but also a traditional construction of Englishness: narrative forms play in fact a relevant role in the construction of a nation and its identity (Bhabha 1990, 308). Therefore, if an established representation of Englishness may be obtained through a realist form, the use of modernist and postmodernist devices is likely to defy a

conventional depiction of Englishness (Bentley, 488). This factor should therefore be considered when examining Smith's use of formal techniques (Bentley, 488-489). Therefore, it is not surprising that Smith combines realist techniques with modernist devices: by doing so, Smith appears to influence the revision of Englishness (Bentley, 501).

It may thus be claimed that Smith does not only direct the minorities or mixed-race characters her novel incorporates, through the use of realism she also addresses the white readership (Bentley, 497-498). The concomitant deployment of modernist techniques, however, inevitably disrupts the traditional idea of Englishness, which used to be constructed through realism (Bentley, 488). Therefore, Smith's decision to narrate tales which can be defined postcolonial, by using a mode which combines realist and modernist elements, can be related to the necessity of a negotiation (Bentley, 497-498). Not only does the British contemporary self need to negotiate between old and new acquired values; also an increasingly multicultural society, like the one described by Smith, requires a negotiation rather than a rejection between the minorities' originary genealogical, cultural and ethnic roots and England's traditional construction of its identity (Bentley, 498). Therefore, as suggested by Bhabha, literary form is likely to play an important role in the construction of national identity (Bhabha 1990, 292).

Through the simultaneous use of realism and modernism, Smith does not only seem to reshape Englishness but the British postmodern self too. If realism and modernism can coexist, the British self can manage to accept the concomitant presence of past and present values and beliefs. The British self is thus required to accept ambivalence as an integrant part of its life, since existence is no longer coherent in postmodernity (see Bauman 2007a, 26). Consequently, as for a new emergent model of Englishness, a negotiation appears indispensable for the formation of individual identity too (see Bentley, 498).

The revision of Englishness and of the British self is prompted not only through the concomitant deployment of realist and modernist techniques, but also through narrative fragmentation, which is a distinctive modernist technique (see Stevenson, 91). As a result, the novel, just as the British self and Englishness, is not only ambivalent, but even fragmented. The novel's several different fragments, nonetheless, still form one entity, just as many different components of identity constitute both the self and national identity.

To conclude, the novel, through both its thematic issues and literary form, seems to consider the British self and Englishness in light of the changes which have occurred throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *White Teeth* seems in fact to acknowledge the complications which emerge when dealing with the formation of identity in a postcolonial and postmodern world (see Paproth, 9-10). Therefore, *White Teeth* contributes, through both its subject matter and form, to defining the present shape of the British self and Englishness in light of the social and cultural changes which have affected 20<sup>th</sup>-century England. (see Head, 106-107; see Bentley, 501).

## 2. Britishness' Various Selves in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*: an Analysis of the Novel's Characters

### 2.1 Introduction

*White Teeth* opens by quoting "What is past is prologue" from the Inscription in Washington museum (Silverblatt, 11:53). This quotation seems to suggest that on the one hand, past cannot be forgotten, but on the other hand, human beings should also go on with their lives (Silverblatt, 12:00-12:47). The problem with Smith's characters is that they fear that what occurred in the past will occur again and are thus haunted by their genealogical, historical and cultural heritage and roots (Silverblatt, 12:48-13:35). As a consequence of these anxieties, when the past and the influence of roots appear or reappear in the characters' life, the characters are driven to face their identity and pushed to shape identities which are coherent and stable.

The self living in a postmodern world, however, as pointed out by Bauman, lacks stability and solidity and its subjective identity can consequently not be fixed (Bauman, quoted in Elliott, 154). Nevertheless, as happens in Smith's novel, the postmodern self may still attempt to frame and control its identity (see Elliott, 158). The kind of individual which emerges seems thus to contrast with the postmodern self, since he does not manage to tolerate the ambiguity of the world in which he lives (Elliott, 158-159). He is thus characterized by efforts to control, manipulate and shape both his own and others' identity and life (Elliott, 158-159). Further, his difficulty to accept ambiguity may be increased by the legacies of colonialism: in fact, those

characters who belong to mixed-race families or descend from immigrants are likely to find it even more difficult to negotiate amongst ambivalent aspects.

In the attempt to determine a fixed identity, some of Smith's characters tend to desperately cling to those genealogical, historical and cultural roots they have inherited and which are thought to predetermine their present (Sell, 29); some others try to escape the influence of inherited roots by rejecting and substituting them. Characters such as Samad attempt to control and determine identity by clinging to their ancestry and historical roots, some others, such as Irie, by rejecting their genealogical and racial heritage, yet others, such as Samad, Millat, Magid, by either embracing or refusing their cultural heritage and, finally, still others, such as Marcus and Joyce Chalfen, by trying to scientifically or socially determine life.

However, it is unthinkable to assume that identity should choose one aspect over another: identity is actually based on a series of unending reinventions and negotiations (Sell, 34-35). As pointed out by Stuart Hall, identity is continuously transformed and does not represent any longer the secure essence of selfhood (Hall 1996, 3). By representing characters who are constantly preoccupied with controlling their own and others' identity and by stressing their failure in coming to terms with the transformations an identity is required to face, Smith seems to suggest the futility of a search for a coherent and stable identity and the necessity of a negotiation amongst ambivalent components (Thompson, 135). The pointlessness of the pursuit of a unified and coherent identity and selfhood can be explained by recalling Paul Gilroy, who argues that difference does exist within individuals: hence, the self does not lack internal fragmentation, and seems thus required to negotiate amongst the ambivalent, even conflicting, aspects within itself (Gilroy, 228).

The futility of the pursuit of a fixed identity seems to be pointed out also by contrasting the characters who attempt to determine their own and others' lives with characters who are not willing to or cannot control their identity or

future existence (Childs, 211). These characters, who represent the instability and changeability of life, appear thus to express the triumph of chance over determinism.

To recapitulate, Smith represents characters who tend to be caught between binaries and who are likely to choose one component of identity amongst the many they are constituted by in order to shape a coherent identity (Paproth, 9-10). However, they inevitably fail in their attempts to control identity without a negotiation, which reveals to be actually indispensable in the world in which they live (Paproth, 10; Thompson, 135).

## 2.2 Ancestry and Historical Roots

As mentioned above, there are characters in *White Teeth* who have difficulties in dealing with their past, here understood as the influence ancestry and historical roots have on one's present. When genealogical and historical roots appear or reappear in the characters' life, characters tend either to cling to them or to reject them. Let us now consider the different specific situations and the characters' personal reaction to their ancestry and historical roots.

### 2.2.1 Samad's relationship to his ancestry and past history

Samad is a Bengali who has fought for the UK during the Second World War. In 1973, like many other Asians belonging to former British colonies, he decides to move to England to seek a fresh start with his young wife, Alsana (Smith, 12; Hall 2006, 292). Samad's life in the UK, however, is characterized by a constant fear of disappearance (Amine, 78). This concern can be noticed, for instance, in his need to engrave his name on a London bench as if to prevent

the risks of invisibility (Amine, 78). Nonetheless, not only is Samad looking for personal recognition but also for historical acknowledgement (Amine, 78). In fact, Samad believes that one's present is shaped by his own past history; as a consequence, Samad conveys his genealogical and historical roots a great importance (Sell, 30; Paproth, 15).

In order to obtain a public historical recognition, Samad asks Abdul-Mickey, the owner of O'Connell's, the pub where he daily encounters his friend Archibald, to display the portrait of his great-grandfather Mangal Pande, the first mutineer of 1857 (Smith, quoted in Amine, 78). Despite Abdul-Mickey's permission, however, the portrait hanging on the wall does not seem to fully satisfy Samad: in fact, he even attempts to reinterpret his ancestor's rebellion and resistance to the Empire, frequently lacking objectivity (Amine, 78; Erll, 164). Believing that the past determines one's present, Samad thus tries to control and reshape his interaction and relationship with history (Sell, 30; Paproth, 15). He even becomes increasingly convinced that by changing Britons' perception and opinion of his ancestor, he himself can ultimately benefit from such a change (Paproth, 15). On the basis of this, it is evident that he is constantly engaged with the attempt to deal with the influence and effects his genealogy and historical roots have on his present life (Paproth, 15). Therefore, it is possible to state that Samad's attitude towards ancestry and history is the result of his belief that the past determines the present (Sell, 30): he is thus convinced that by understanding his own history, he can also understand his present life (Paproth, 15). It is perhaps not surprising that he keeps asking Archibald what he is going to tell his own children when they ask him who he is (Smith, 121). Samad, in fact, believes that one "must live life with the full knowledge that [his] actions will *remain*" and that "we are creatures of consequence", therefore "children will be born of our actions" which "*will become their destinies*" (Smith, 102; emphasis in original). Hence,

Samad strongly believes that one's present and future are shaped and predetermined by the past (Paproth, 15).

The historical event Samad constantly refers to is the Indian Mutiny, which has been converted into a crucial episode within British history and has been described and recounted from both the imperial and the postcolonial perspective (Erll, 164). Not surprisingly, the novel has become the main site of creation and alteration of the mutiny memory (Erll, 164). From the imperial viewpoint, Indians, by rebelling to their rulers, have betrayed Britons' trust (Erll, 164). Thus, up to 1947, and even after India's independence, the mutiny was mythicized by the British Empire in order to legitimize British violent response to rebellion and its presence in the colony, often forgetting that some of the atrocities perpetrated by British rulers had been far more brutal (Erll, 164). Not only did the Empire refigure the mutiny memory. The mutiny memory was also refigured from a postcolonial perspective, which challenges and criticizes the British version of the Indian Mutiny (Erll, 165).

Samad's revision of the Indian Mutiny represents a clear example of postcolonial memory (Erll, 177). Samad claims that Mangal Pande, the first one to rebel against British rulers in 1857 Indian Mutiny, was his great-grandfather (Smith, quoted in Erll, 177). Even though British historiography depicts Mangal Pande as a man intoxicated with religious fanaticism and drugs, who even failed as a mutineer since he was unable to shoot his lieutenant first and eventually himself, Samad cannot accept such a description (Smith, quoted in Erll, 177). In fact, "when a man has nothing but his blood to commend him, each drop of it matters, matters terribly" (Smith, 255). This seems thus to be the reason why he is unwilling to accept the definition of the word 'Pandy' provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which, alongside with the meaning 'mutineer', supplies other meanings such as 'traitor', 'fool', 'coward' (Smith, 251). As a consequence, Samad is keen on providing the "full story" of the Indian Mutiny, claiming that full stories are "as rear as honesty" (Smith, 252; emphasis in

original). When listening to Samad's story, however, Archibald suggests that it is simply his friend's version and by claiming that "the truth is the truth, no matter how nasty it may taste" he suggests that Samad's problem is his incapability to "listen to the evidence" (Smith, 252-253). Thus, like the colonizers, Samad himself tends to refigure the Indian Mutiny and attempts to mythicize his forefather and his actions in order to turn him into a hero to be proud of (Erll, 177). Samad claims that Mangal "sacrificed his life in the name of justice for India" and even though he knew that he would be hanged, at the trial he did not list the names of the other rebels (Smith, 256). Even though English historiography tries to discredit Pande "because [it] cannot bear to give an Indian his due", according to Samad he was actually a hero (Smith, 99). Therefore, Samad's reconstruction of his ancestor's involvement in the Indian Mutiny implies the value he lies in his genealogical and historical roots, believing them to shape his own present (Sell, 30).

However, by "clinging to a past hero who himself clung to the past" Samad is ultimately unable to move forward and to relate himself with the present (Erll, 177). By recalling the Indian Mutiny and Samad's revision of it, Smith seems to disapprove of a certain kind of memory which tends to mythicize the past without evaluating it objectively or confronting it with other versions of the same story (Erll, 178). Samad's attitude towards the Indian Mutiny does not appear to be effective in multicultural London (Erll, 178). Conversely, what appears to be of fundamental importance in *White Teeth* is "the art of remembering to forget": hence, alongside with being conscious of the past, one should also be able to forget when needed (Erll, 178). This does not mean that the past has to be forgotten completely: actually, since one's identity is shaped by the intervention of history, one has to be aware of it in order to understand who he is and be conscious of the fluidity and changes of identity (Beukema, 4). However, Samad tends to cling to a past he believes has

determined his present and which he himself has recreated without negotiating it with other versions of the same story (Erll, 178).

An alternative type of memory is the one shared by Samad with Archibald when retelling episodes which happened to them during the Second World War in which they both fought and met each other for the first time (Erll, 178). They usually meet at O'Connell's, where, recalling their military experience, Samad and Archie know themselves by recognizing each one's and the other's story (Erll, 178; Beukema, 7). O'Connell's thus represents the place where they can constitute their identity in relation and opposition to each other (Beukema, 7). On the basis of the episodes they tend to recall, which are connected to the war, it appears that history's role in the configuration and construction of identity is actually important and thus cannot be entirely neglected when attempting to understand the self (Beukema, 7). However, a confrontation with others seems to be essential: as suggested by Hall, it is only when confronted with others, as part of the process of identification, that an identity can assert itself (1996, 4). Therefore, unlike Samad's memory of the Indian Mutiny, the remembering of the Second World War seems to be a more positive form of memory precisely because it is negotiated between two subjects (Erll, 178).

Nevertheless, since O'Connell's represents "Archie's and Samad's home from home" (Smith, 184), it functions as a sort of shelter from the external world and its history (Paproth, 16). Thus, despite being filled with a common history, O'Connell's still embodies a place where Samad and Archie can create their own version of history disjointedly from the outside world (Paproth, 16). For instance, when their families are watching together the Fall of the Berlin Wall on television, both Samad and Archibald are unable to recognize the prominence of such a happening and tend to relate it and explain their uneasiness about the occurrence through their past experience during the war (Smith, 239). Archibald claims that the two of them were there and that

Germany was divided for a reason (Smith, 239). In addition, Samad utters that “younger people forget why certain things were done”, stating that history “cannot be found in books” but it is only by experiencing it that one can learn about it (Smith, 239-240). However, Irie, Archibald’s daughter, criticizes them both and, especially by condemning Samad’s viewpoint, she asserts that “[h]e goes on like he knows everything. Everything’s always about *him* – and [she’s] trying to talk about now, *today*, Germany” (Smith, 240; emphasis in original). Irie appears unable to bear the fact that they are stuck in the past, being consequently unable to acknowledge “the enormity of what’s going on” (Smith, 241). After Irie has left the room, followed by Millat, Clara, Irie’s mother, tries to suggest that they should not discourage their children from developing their own personal, even different, opinion (Smith, 241). However, Archibald claims that women should care about the emotional field and Samad adds that Clara and Alsana are still young women and lack the experience and knowledge they can provide the children (Smith, 242). At this insult Clara stands up and leaves, followed by Alsana, who, before going away, accuses them of talking “a great deal of the youknowwhat” (Smith, 242). Deserted by both their children and wives there is nowhere to go but O’Connell’s, where they can be history experts without family bothering them (Smith, 243, 245). Smith ridicules them by suggesting that there are “no better historians, no better experts in the *world* when it [comes] to *The Post-war Reconstruction*” (Smith, 245; emphasis in original). Therefore, O’Connell’s represents the place where they can recreate their own version of history, distancing themselves from both their own families and the outside world.

In conclusion, by referring to many past episodes and tales, Smith seems to suggest that “no place can be void of history” (Beukema, 7). Moreover, due to its intervention, history constitutes an essential element in the process of construction and constant reshaping of identity: hence, in order to understand one’s identity, it may be useful to consider the impact of history (Hall 1996, 4;

Beukema, 7). However, not all forms of remembering of the past seem to be equally positive (Erll, 178). A confrontation and subsequent negotiation with the other is in fact fundamental in the revision of history, and this is precisely what Samad lacks when remembering the Indian Mutiny (Beukema, 4; Erll, 178). Similarly, also Samad and Archie's version of the Second World War is constructed in isolation from the outside world (see Paproth, 16). Hence, on the evidence of this, it appears that Samad's relationship with his ancestry and historical roots is based on the lack of an actual negotiation between his version of the story and others' version of the same story. Further, it is possible to claim that Samad's perspective on and obsessive relationship to genealogy and history seem to stress his belief that one's present is determined by past actions: however, he does not seem to be content with relying on the past, he even strives to shape his connection with his ancestry and historical roots (Paproth, 15). Thus, he desperately tries to define the man he is in the present by attempting to control and fix his identity (Paproth, 15). However, conversely to what he thinks, one should be able to relinquish history when necessary, otherwise its excessive weight risks haunting one's present and preventing him from living it (Paproth, 15).

### 2.2.2 Irie's relationship to her genealogical roots

Irie, unlike Samad, can neither rely on nor cling to her genealogical or historical roots. Conversely, due to the secrets of her family history, she tends to prune and escape those roots which seem to be clenching her (Paproth, 16). Thus, when she meets the Chalfens for the first time, she is fascinated by a type of communication which flows without restrictions from adults to children, "untrammled, unblocked by history, *free*" (Smith, 319; emphasis in original). Further, Irie is positively surprised by Marcus Chalfen, who "deal[s] in the present" without constantly referring to past history: thus, unlike her own father,

Archibald, and his friend Samad, he does not seem to be stuck in the past (Smith, 326). Moreover, it seems to her that the Chalfens do not hide their emotions nor do they nostalgically look at photographs: it appears that there are no secret family histories amongst them (Smith, 328-329). As a consequence, Irie craves to blend with and become one of them (Smith, 328). When entering their house Irie feels as if she is “crossing borders, sneaking into England” (Smith, 328): hence, merging with the Chalfens means reaching their Englishness and its purity, which is what Irie lacks for having inherited double racial features (Smith, 328; Thompson, 126).

Her parents and family history, conversely, appear to Irie much more complicated: to begin with, her father Archibald, an Englishman, spends much of his time with his friend Samad, recalling and recounting episodes happened during the Second World War (Smith, 245). Having experienced the war directly, they in fact believe to be the only one to have the authority to discuss it (Smith, 245). This attitude obviously prevents conversations to flow freely from adults to children and vice versa (Smith, 240). Further, as far as Irie’s family history is concerned, Archibald only manages to go as far back as his father’s birth which can be approximately dated back to 1895 (Smith, 337). As far as her mother Clara, a Jamaican woman, is concerned, she can only claim with absolute certainty that her own mother, Hortense, was born in a Catholic Church during the 1907 Kingston earthquake, but disbelieves any other story, reducing it to “rumour, folk-tale and myth” (Smith, 337-338). Consequently, when comparing her lacking and incomplete family tree with the Chalfens’ tree, Irie’s admiration for the Chalfens increases even more (Smith, 338).

The constant comparison between her family and the Chalfens does not push her to seek her own roots. Conversely, she increasingly desires to immerse herself in Chalfens’ way of living and thinking (Smith, 351). One night, however, while trying to convince her mother to let her take a gap year before enrolling at university, Irie finds out about her mother’s false teeth, which have

replaced the top teeth lost during a motorbike accident (Smith, 378). “To her, this [is] yet another item in a long list of parental hypocrisies and untruths, this [is] another example of the Jones/Bowden gift for secret histories, stories you never got told, history you never entirely uncovered, rumour you never unravelled” (Smith, 379). Irie’s irritation seems thus to be increased by the endless list of clues constantly suggesting that her own family is hiding something from her (Smith, 379). Archibald tries to calm her down uttering that “[i]t’s not the end of the world” (Smith, 379). Actually, it is for Irie, since “[s]he [is] sick of never getting the whole truth” (Smith, 379). As a consequence of this, Irie returns to her bedroom, packs her school work and some clothes and decides to leave. She first thinks to go and stay by the Chalfens, but she soon realises that “there [are] no answers there, only more places to escape”; Irie, on the contrary, needs to go “deep into the heart of it” (Smith, 379). By acknowledging for the first time the meaning and importance of one’s genealogical and historical roots, she resolves to go to her grandmother’s, to find out her own history (Smith, 380; Thompson, 132).

By staying at Hortense’s, Irie discovers other family secrets. Clara’s former boyfriend, Ryan Topps, lives by Hortense; thus, when introducing Irie to Mr Topps, Hortense whispers “[s]he might have been yours” (Smith, 390; emphasis in original). Irie, who does not know who he is or, better said, what he used to be for her mother, cannot entirely understand the meaning of such a whisper. She thus simply adds this sentence to that list of incomprehensible clues she has been collecting: “Ambrosia Bowden gave birth in an earthquake . . . Captain Charlie Durham was a no-good djam fool boy . . . false teeth in a glass . . . *she might have been yours . . .*” (Smith, 390; emphasis in original). Not only does she overhear and grasp half-sentences, but, hidden “in cupboards and neglected drawers”, she also finds out about some of the secrets which had been concealed to her (Smith, 399). She finds photographs of Ambrosia, Hortense’s mother, a picture portraying Charlie Durham, a bible lacking a line and pictures

of Clara while grinning and consequently revealing the lack of the top teeth (Smith, 399). Further, she even reads books about Jamaica, found in her grandmother's library (Smith, 400). She collects everything she finds which tells her where she comes from and stores it under the sofa where she sleeps, "as if by osmosis the richness of them would pass through the fabric while she [is] sleeping and seep right into her" (Smith, 400). Through all these photographs and written accounts of her family history, Irie begins to fantasize about her homeland and imagines it as an uncomplicated place, "where things simply *were*" (Smith, 402; emphasis in original). Jamaica looks like a "beginning" to her, a perfect "blank page" where to take shelter; she even starts to associate it with "*paradise*" and "freedom" (Smith, 402, 408).

However, the closer she feels to her homeland, the more something or somebody belonging to the present interferes with it: hence, despite her attempts to cling to the "blankness of the past", there is always something bringing her back to the present (Smith, 402). Even her grandmother Hortense, when asked about past family history, tells Irie that "[d]e past is done wid. Nobody learn nuttin' from it" (Smith, 410). Nevertheless, when Hortense discovers that the End of the World, according to the evaluation of the Jehovah's Witnesses, is predicted to happen in 2000, she states that she is "gwan to be in *Jamaica* to see it" and suggests that Irie can go with her (Smith, 411; emphasis in original). Hence, despite her previous claim, the past still seems to matter. Hortense herself, whose personal story is intimately linked to English colonialism, would not be born if it was not England's colonial past (Beukema, 7).

Irie's attitude towards her genealogical and historical roots appears to be ambivalent too: at first she distances herself from her family past history, but progressively understands its importance and, deciding to stay at her grandmother's, desires to find her own history and roots (Thompson, 132). Nevertheless, despite the new acquired certainties, there are still unrevealed mysteries about her family history and, consequently, about her family tree,

which cannot be uncovered: the roots of her family tree can thus not be unburied (Smith, 338; Thompson, 132). Therefore, despite her efforts, Irie does not manage to return to her originary roots, which would represent her historical certainty, and should thus accept the obvious limits and pointlessness of such a quest (Thompson, 133). It is thus necessary to discard memory sometimes (Erll, 178). In the final part of the novel Irie is again inclined towards a rejection of the past. Irritated by Samad's and her own family behaviour, Irie flies into a rage. By comparing the Iqbals and the Joneses to other families she considers more 'normal', she utters that the latter's existence is "not this endless maze of present rooms and past rooms and the things said in them years ago and everybody's old historical shit all over the place", because "[t]hey're not always hearing the same old shit" (Smith, 514). Irie goes on claiming that "every single fucking day is not this huge battle between who they are and who they should be, what they were and what they will be": "as far as they're concerned, it's the *past*" (Smith, 515; emphasis in original).

To recapitulate, it seems that Irie's initial desire to blend with the Chalfens stems from her attempt to reach a stable and fixed identity which would allow Irie to distance herself "from the chaotic, random flesh of her own family" (Smith, 342). However, she soon realises that she cannot spend her entire life escaping from her roots, but has to come to terms with them: one's roots and family history cannot be entirely rejected, since, willing or not, they determine one's identity (Groß, 42). Her mother's false teeth precisely act as a reminder of the risks one comes across when attempting to prune his own roots (Groß, 43). Thus, Irie herself realises that finding her own familial and historical roots is important to understand who she is (Thompson, 132). However, despite the new acquired certainties, there are still uncovered mysteries about her past history which cannot be revealed nor unburied (Thompson, 132). As a result, Irie is not able to go back to her originary family history or roots. However, the search itself for stable, coherent and definite origins and roots does not seem to

be fruitful in a “society where nothing seems to be dependable or definable” (Thompson, 133). By first attempting to blend with the Chalfens and by later trying to cling to “the perfect blankness of the past”, Irie strives to determine a stable identity, escaping randomness (Smith, 342, 402; Thompson, 133). However, she herself seems to realise that there are still issues which cannot be entirely controlled or recouped. This realization consequently leads her to a further attempt to reject the past, looking forward to “a time not far from now, when roots won’t matter any more because they can’t because they mustn’t because they’re too long and they’re too tortuous and they’re just buried too damn deep” (Smith, 527).

Therefore, to conclude, Irie’s attitude towards her ancestry and family past history is rather ambivalent: on the one hand, she would like to escape from her originary roots; on the other hand, she also tries to cling to those same genealogical and historical roots. In both cases, she is attempting to reach a definite identity, untroubled by uncertainties and chance (Thompson, 133, 135). Throughout the novel, however, Irie has to face the impossibility of such a quest (Thompson, 133). Moreover, when pregnant, Irie seems required to accept her offspring’s rootlessness and lack of an exact family history and historical past (Smith, 515; Thompson, 134). Having had an intercourse with both Millat and Magid Iqbal, she is uncertain of who the father of her child is and thus needs to tolerate a certain ambiguity (Smith, 515). If at first she is saddened by such circumstances, she later has to accept the fact that she cannot discover “her body’s decision” (Smith, 515). Attempting to do so would mean to go back to the moment in which sperm met the egg, which actually “cannot be traced” (Smith, 527). Therefore, the attempt to control identity and the search for an origin which is stable and cohesive ultimately reveal futile (Thompson, 133).

### 2.2.3 Comparing and Contrasting Samad's and Irie's attitudes

Despite their different starting points and distinct perspectives regarding the influence and weight of history upon the present, both Samad and Irie appear to be in need of a negotiation between the contrasting binaries they are caught between (Paproth, 17). Both of them, by either clinging to or escaping from their ancestry and historical roots, are attempting to determine and maintain identities and origins which are as certain and definite as possible (Paproth, 15; Thompson, 135). Yet paradoxically, they appear to find stability only by reshaping history, as happens to Samad, and by clinging to a past which is blank, as happens to Irie (Paproth, 15; Smith, 252-253).

However, as pointed out by Hall, identity, precisely because of the intervention of discourses such as history, culture and language, is constantly reshaped and transformed (1996, 4). Further, as suggested by Bauman, identity in a postmodern world is characterized by an increasing lack of stability; thus, it cannot be fixed (Bauman, quoted in Elliott, 154).

Samad and Irie, however, seem unable to deal with the ruptures and fractures identity undergoes as the result of its continuous changes; thus, by either going back to or cutting ties with their origin, they try to shape their identity as a cohesive and permanent entity (Thompson, 135). Eventually, it appears that both too much remembering and forgetting reveal to be risky: as stressed by Erll, by criticizing a certain kind of memory Smith does not advise an indiscriminate forgetfulness of the past but rather the need for a negotiation when remembering (178). If history cannot be entirely escaped since ancestry and its heritage allows one to root somewhere, it is still true that one's identity and life do not remain fixed and stable: thus, both Samad and Irie should learn to accept uncertainty and ambivalence, without trying to constantly control their origin and identity by clinging to alleged stable positions (Childs, 214).

## 2.3 Racial Heritage

Not only does one's past appear under the form of ancestry or historical roots. It also reveals itself through racial heritage. Race is a construction which has been socially and politically shaped and is considered to be based on inherited genetic and biological features (Hall 2006, 299). However, since genetic and biological characteristics are not immediately evident, they are made visible through factors such as skin colour, hair texture, body shape, and other distinctive features (Hall 2006, 299). Within Smith's novel *White Teeth*, Irie is the character who mostly suffers the implications of her racial heritage.

### 2.3.1 Irie's Relationship to her Racial Heritage

During adolescence, like many other youngsters her age, Irie becomes obsessed with her physical appearance (Smith, 266, 273). Unlike other adolescents, however, Irie's anxieties are not simply related to her age, but actually stem from her double racial heritage (McMann, 629). Being born from a Jamaican mother and an English father, Irie has thus received double racial features (Thompson, 126). As a consequence, she attempts to reach a balance between her mother's Jamaican features and her father's English characteristics (McMann, 629). Nonetheless, by living in England, a country where the European silhouette represents the canonical form of beauty, Irie is led to consider her Jamaican heritage the source of her difficulties to accept herself (Thompson, 128). Consequently, having decided that the genes inherited from her father are the one to be maintained, Irie becomes increasingly concerned about those characteristics which can be associated with her Jamaican side of the family, such as her body shape and hair (Thompson, 127).

Being such a “big brown goddess” (Smith, 329), as Irie is addressed by the researcher and scientist Marcus Chalfen, makes her think that “[t]he European proportions of Clara’s figure [have] skipped a generation, and she [is] landed instead with Hortense’s substantial Jamaican frame” (Smith, 265). She thus becomes increasingly convinced that the features inherited from her mother’s side of the family need to be modified in order to fit in and feel less “a stranger in a strange land” (Smith, 266; Thompson, 127). As a consequence, she tries anything in her power to conceal those “big tits, big butt, big hips, big thighs, big teeth” (Smith, 265). She attempts to hide her enormous bottom by strategically tying clothes around it and conceals her breast and belly by wearing reducing bras and panties (Smith, 265). Despite her mother’s efforts to make her realise she is totally fine as she is, Irie does not manage to understand it; on the one hand “[t]here [is] England, a gigantic mirror” and on the other hand “there [is] Irie, without reflection” (Smith, 266). The lack of a ‘mirror’ where to see a reflection of her own image pushes her to believe “in her ugliness, in her *wrongness*”, convincing her that “[s]he [is] all *wrong*” (Smith, 268; emphasis in original).

Such a quest for a reflection brings her to attempt to identify herself with the Dark Lady of Shakespeare’s sonnets. While her teacher is explaining sonnet 127 to the class, Irie is struck by the description of the Dark Lady and inquires whether she was black (Smith, 271). The teacher replies that “she’s not black in the modern sense” but “*dark*” (Smith, 271). The sonnet is actually debating the clash between a natural complexion and the fashionable tendency of the time to put make-up on (Smith, 272). Hence, the teacher, by providing what is a poetically correct clarification, prevents Irie even from recognizing herself in the Dark Lady (Groß, 42). As a consequence, “the reflection that Irie had glimpsed [slinks] back into the familiar darkness”, losing another chance to find a model on which to rely and which may possibly diminish her low-esteem (Smith, 272; Groß, 42).

Not only does she strive to fight her “mountainous curves”, she also struggles against her “impossible Afro hair” (Smith, 268). Hence, alongside with her body, her hair constitutes another feature which highlights her Jamaican heritage and which prevents her from conforming to the European ideal of beauty (McMann, 630). Irie thus decides to transform her hairstyle and goes to a hairdresser in order to make her hair straight and red dyed (Smith, 274). The hairdressers working at ‘P.K.’s Afro Hair: Design and Management’ daily strive to turn each curly African hair into straightness (Smith, 275). Despite knowing that the hair soon resumes its initial shape, the hairdressers support and encourage their clients claiming that the hair is “as straight as it ever going to be” (Smith, 276). Irie herself hopes that the treatment will work and, despite being told that the hair needs to be dirty first, she resolves to have her hair straight that same day (Smith, 277-278). However, the treatment is a complete failure: not only is it unsuccessful, but the chemical products used also make Irie’s hair fall off (Smith, 278). As a result, Irie is sent to a shop nearby to purchase fake hair to replace her own (Smith, 279). Thus, she eventually achieves what she craved and leaves the hairdresser wearing straight red hair; ironically, however, she leaves with somebody else’s hair, not her own (Smith, 282).

Hence, the desire “to be the same as everybody else” pushes Irie to conceal her body shape and to undergo the hair straightening treatment, both resulting in bodily pain: her reducing bras and panties barely allow her to breathe, whereas the straightening process has irreversibly damaged her hair (Smith, 284; Thompson, 127-128). As already mentioned, Irie’s anxieties originate from living within a body which is rooted both in England and in Jamaica (Thompson, 127). As pointed out by Ngcobo, mixed race people encounter much more difficulties when trying to self-define themselves and they are consequently pushed to cling to either one side or the other, or to reject both (Ngcobo, quoted in Thompson, 127-128). Irie’s attempt to reject a part of her

racial heritage, i.e. her Jamaican roots, in order to make the other part of her heritage, i.e. her English roots, prevail, exemplifies the tendency, from part of mixed race people, to favour dominant racial characteristics over those features which would belong to a minority group within England (Thompson, 128). However, Irie's endeavour to cope with her identity by refusing one part of it and clinging to the other one proves damaging: her attempt to purposely control her identity thus fails (Thompson, 128). Nevertheless, when pregnant, whichever the actual father of her child is, either Millat or Magid, she seems required to endure a further racial mixing: not only will her offspring inherit her dual racial heritage, but also the Iqbals' (Dalleo, 101). However, perhaps unsurprisingly, Irie may not choose England as the place where to raise her child, but the Caribbean (Smith, 541). Thus, racial mixing and her own difficulty in fitting in can be resolved, whether this can be an actual and concrete solution, by leaving England: therefore, it seems that escaping England may become the prerequisite in order to face the challenge of a mixed race heritage (McMann, 631).

## 2.4 Cultural Heritage

The past can disclose even under the form of cultural roots, which tend to reveal themselves mainly through religious faith and family tradition within *White Teeth*. Before beginning to analyse the characters' specific situations, it would be useful to recall Stuart Hall's second way of thinking cultural identity (Beukema, 3). Hall's second model, alongside with recognizing the presence of common experiences within a same group, argues that there are also components which diverge radically from one another and which represent "ruptures and discontinuities" within a common experience (Hall 2003, 236). Thus, such a model considers cultural identity constituted by both continuity and rupture (Hall 2003, 236-237).

Many characters within Smith's novel seem to embody such a position and, despite being unconscious of it, their cultural identity is constantly transformed and altered (Beukema, 3). However, despite the inevitability of difference, rupture and discontinuity within a common experience, many of Smith's characters seek to be in control of their lives and, ultimately, of their identity, and eventually cling to extreme positions, either rejecting new emerging values seen as elements of rupture or embracing them in an attempt to prevent any kind of continuity (Beukema, 3).

Having recalled Hall's second definition of cultural identity, let us now consider the characters who find themselves dealing with their cultural heritage and their different reactions to it.

#### 2.4.1 Clara's Rebellion to Hortense's Religious Heritage

Hortense, Clara's mother, was born during the 1907 Kingston earthquake (Smith, 34). Her mother, Ambrosia, gives birth to her in Santa Antonia, an old Spanish Church where she is brought by the colonist Glenard, longing to share with her "the opportunity of a little education" (Smith, 360). Glenard is not the first one who, with the pretext of educating her, at the same time tries to take something away from her too (Smith, 356). Another colonist before him, Captain Charlie Durham, after impregnating Ambrosia while drunk, had decided that she required an education (Smith, 356). The narrator suggests that Hortense, who is still inside Ambrosia's womb, "[is] silent witness to what happens when all of a sudden an Englishman decides you need an education" (Smith, 356). However, even though both these men attempt and manage to take advantage of Ambrosia, they are not able to shape her religious faith as they wish (Smith, 359). Captain Durham desires to introduce Ambrosia to the Anglican Church, whereas Glenard recommends the Methodist Church (Smith, 359). However, a third person, a Scottish woman, intervenes in Ambrosia's education and chooses

to bring her to the Jehovah's Witnesses (Smith, 359). Thus, this woman introduces the Bowden family to the word of Jehovah (Smith, 359). Hortense believes that when her own mother became familiar with Jehovah, she herself, despite not being born yet, became aware of the word of Jehovah too (Smith, 359).

On the evidence of this, it appears that Hortense fervently believes in the faith she has been transmitted by her mother Ambrosia. Consequently, she spends almost her entire life waiting for the End of the World predicted by religious intellectuals studying the bible, and hoping to be one of the saved (Smith, 32, 409). Hence, when predictions prove wrong in 1914 and 1925, Hortense is rather disappointed (Smith, 32). However, when 1 January 1975 is forecast as the new date for the apocalypse, Hortense thinks this is her last occasion to experience the end of the world (Smith, 33). Being born in 1907, she is getting older and may not have much time left (Smith, 33). Since the end of the world is approaching, there is no time to lose and her daughter Clara is asked to help her mother making banners, writing articles, ringing bells (Smith, 33). Being a firm believer, Hortense has raised up Clara according to Jehovah faith (Smith, 30). However, as an adolescent, Clara, like any other teenager her age, fancies a youngster who studies at her school, Ryan Topps, and is thus distracted from what Hortense considers her duties (Smith, 30). Consequently, her mother does not miss any occasion to remind her that "only 144,000 of the Witnesses of Jehovah would sit in the court of the Lord on Judgment Day", therefore "there [is] no space for nasty-looking so-and-sos on motorcycles" (Smith, 30). Not only does Hortense think that Clara does not have time for boyfriends, she also believes Clara is not like other adolescents, since "she [is] the Lord's child, Hortense's miracle baby" (Smith, 33). Like Hortense herself, who came to the world when the earth was shaking and cracking, Clara's birth can be considered miraculous too, since Hortense became pregnant at forty-eight (Smith, 34). After hearing the voice of the Lord, she "conceive[s] the child He had asked for"

(Smith, 34). Hortense relies on His will and, considering her age, she becomes convinced He wanted to show her another miracle (Smith, 34).

Nonetheless, it is precisely by accomplishing her mother and the Lord's will that Clara meets Ryan and has the chance to speak with him (Smith, 34). Without knowing he lives in there, she rings his bell and, when he appears at the front door, she nervously begins to talk about the Jehovah's (Smith, 35). Using Hortense's metaphor, Clara compares life to a staircase, which one can either descend or ascend and claims that she feels he is descending it (Smith, 34). After lingering on her figure, Ryan invites Clara to enter the house: that same afternoon "the devil [wins] another easy hand in God's poker game" (Smith, 36). From that day onwards, they begin to go out together (Smith, 36). It appears that Clara's interest in Ryan transcends Ryan's ugliness, tiresome nature and unappealing behavior: thus, she transcends Ryan himself (Smith, 37). Thus, despite Hortense's claims, Clara is like any adolescent her age and Ryan only represents the pretext for a passion which has been suppressed too long and now needs to assert itself (Smith, 37). As a result of this acquaintance, "Clara's mind change[s], Clara's clothes change[s], Clara's walk change[s], Clara's soul change[s]" (Smith, 37). Clara is experiencing so many new things in her life that "the more blessed she [feels] on earth, the more rarely she turn[s] her thoughts towards heaven": hence, by "[forgetting] the staircase and [beginning] taking the lift" she feels as if she is one of the saved this very moment (Smith, 38-39).

One day, however, being late for her usual meeting with Ryan, Clara finds him at home, talking with her mother (Smith, 39-40). From that moment onwards, she always finds Ryan at home, conversing with her mother (Smith, 40). If their conversations sound vivacious when entering the house, they suddenly turn silent when Clara approaches Hortense and Ryan: further, as soon as Clara is at home, Ryan leaves thus (Smith, 40-41). He also avoids her at school and even buys a tie (Smith, 41). Yet one day Clara discovers "a tiny silver cross" underneath his pullover and has to acknowledge "what she didn't

want to see” (Smith, 41; emphasis in original). Therefore, when giving her that “look of sympathy, of condescension”, and when commenting negatively on her clothes, both Hortense and Ryan are now determined “to save *her*” (Smith, 41; emphasis in original). Clara’s fears become concrete when Ryan asks her to get on his motorbike to tell Clara that her mother and he himself are concerned about her (Smith, 42). Since there is only one month left before 1 January 1975, Ryan attempts to save Clara and, by quoting Matthew, he claims “[he’s] just separating the sheep from the goats” and believes that Clara herself is a sheep (Smith, 43). Yet Clara replies that “[she would] rather be sizzling in de rains of sulphur wid [her] friends than sittin’ in heaven, bored to tears, wid Darcus<sup>6</sup>, [her] mudder and [him]!” (Smith, 43). Distracted by Clara’s words, Ryan crashes against an oak while driving his motorbike; Ryan is thrown one way, Clara another (Smith, 43-44). Clara, falling down, breaks her top teeth, whereas Ryan stands up unarmed (Smith, 44). This episode makes him believe even more firmly that he is destined to be saved whereas Clara is not: thus, Ryan interprets this episode as a sign of the Lord (Smith, 44).

Clara, nonetheless, reconciles neither with Ryan nor with her mother and the night before the alleged end of the world she throws a party at some friends’ house (Smith, 44). However, there is still “a residue, left over from the evaporation of Clara’s faith” (Smith, 45). Despite running away from her mother’s religious roots, in fact, Clara ironically still waits for a man who can save her (Smith, 45). By quoting Revelation 4:3, the narrator suggests that Clara is waiting for a man who, by choosing her, may allow Clara to “*Walk in white with Him: for [she] was worthy*” (Smith, 45; emphasis in original). Therefore, when Archibald Jones materializes at Clara’s friends’ the morning subsequent to the party, Clara sees much more in him than what he actually is (Smith, 45). Having lost her faith and the world she had been living by until that moment, she consequently looks at Archibald “through the grey-green eyes of loss”

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<sup>6</sup> Clara’s dead father

(Smith, 45). Finding the saviour she was looking for in Archibald, Clara wholly deserts her mother's church and religion; nonetheless, as pointed out by her previous quest for a saviour, "she [is] not yet the kind of carefree atheist" (Smith, 46). As a consequence of the remaining left over by her faith, she wonders whether to get married or not (Smith, 46). The narrator suggests that "more worrying than God [is] her mother" (Smith, 46): not only is Hortense opposed to this mixed race relationship, yet, if this is Clara's choice, she "would prefer her to marry an unsuitable man rather than to live with him in sin" (Smith, 46). Aware of Hortense's thought, Clara purposely inquires Archibald to fetch her away without getting married (Smith, 46). Nevertheless, they eventually get married and, despite Clara's intentional attempts to distance herself from her mother's faith, she is destined to always bring within herself a remainder of her mother's faith and, consequently, of her roots. It should thus not be surprising that, when her daughter Irie stays by Hortense's seeking her roots, Clara almost threatens her mother and orders her not to fill Irie's head "with a whole load of nonsense" (Smith, 394). Being so touchy and becoming easily irritated when the issue is faced, Clara's conduct permits Hortense to sense her own daughter's dread (Smith, 395). The narrator himself, commenting on Clara's attitude, suggests the fragility of Clara's atheism (Smith, 395).

In conclusion, despite Clara's efforts to distance herself from Hortense's faith after she has lost her own, it appears that Clara's quest for a fresh start is rather pointless. After deserting the church, not only does she attempt to run away from Hortense, she even seems to intentionally behave in opposition to her. Nonetheless, despite her desire to cling to atheism, residues belonging to her past religious faith and upbringing keep materializing in her life, forcing her to face them, willing or not. Thus, it does not seem possible to entirely escape one's roots. Despite the many changes one undergoes throughout his life, Clara's character and the continuous remnants which keep emerging from her past seem to prove the pointlessness of a quest for coherency and the

inescapability from one's biological roots. Hence, a negotiation between what one used to be and what one has become appears essential in order not to struggle against those aspects which initially have forged the individual and which are inevitably carried into the present.

#### 2.4.2 Magid's and Millat's Response to their Father's Islamic Faith

As children, Magid and Millat manage to relate themselves to others and seem to seek a negotiation between their biological roots and English values (Beukema, 8). Millat, for instance, alongside with living within a Bengali family, listens to Bruce Springsteen and Michael Jackson as a result of being born in the West (Smith, 156). Magid, in addition to being raised according to Muslim principles, also desires to participate in the Harvest Festival, like any other pupil in his school, despite Samad's opposition (Smith, 150). However, as children they already seem to reveal contrasting inclinations, which will bring them to opposing values, beliefs and choices as adults. As a child Millat is rather lively and his father tends to define him "a good-for-nothing" (Smith, 135): his strong personality and predisposition for troubles may perhaps forecast his future as a leader of a group of Raggastani first and of a fundamentalist Islamic group, KEVIN, later on (Smith, 135, 231, 334). Unlike his brother Millat, Magid, as a nine-year-old child, not only is impressively intelligent and talented for scientific subjects; he also desperately desires to be English, consequently turning his name into Mark Smith (Smith, 134, 151). Magid's juvenile predispositions and desires seem to come true when he later joins Marcus's scientific project and even turns "more English than the English" (Smith, 406). On the basis of this, it seems that when growing up they are increasingly distanced from one another and from the hybridized identity of their childhood (Beukema, 8). The fluidity of their childhood identity seems to be altered under the influence of the outside world and both Magid and Millat are led to seek a

stable identity constituted mainly of one primarily aspect (Beukema, 8). Unlike Irie, whose predicament arises from her double racial heritage, Magid and Millat's crisis stems from a double national and cultural heritage (Thompson, 129). If England, from which they have inherited their Western principles and beliefs, is their homeland, their parents were born in Bangladesh; therefore, by moving to England, their parents have brought within themselves their cultural and national roots (Thompson, 129). Magid and Millat would need to negotiate between their Bengali and Western heritage, however as adolescents they seem to become increasingly incapable of managing this mediation (Thompson, 129).

Magid and Millat would perhaps experience fewer difficulties if their father Samad did not interfere with their lives (Thompson, 129). However Samad cannot help intervening in his sons' lives since it is "[e]asy for children to go off the rails in this day and age" (Smith, 190, 191). Further, Samad himself feels corrupted by England and states that what others would call "assimilation" is rather "corruption" (Smith, 190). Samad desires in fact an English woman, Poppy, his sons' music teacher and wants her "more than any other woman he had met in the past ten years" (Smith, 133). Thus, Samad becomes increasingly "distracted by the attractions of the flesh" and is much more tempted by sex, which has always troubled him (Smith, 137). In the past, he even had to make a deal with Allah, proposing to avoid masturbation if allowed to drink (Smith, 139). Nonetheless, when the thought of Poppy begins to haunt him, Samad resolves to masturbate instead of eating (Smith, 140). Samad feels he is "a masturbator, a bad husband, an indifferent father, with all the morals of an Anglican" (Smith, 141). It seems that when his attraction for Poppy raises religion as a further factor of diversity, Samad loses his balance (Mirze, 192). Previously he had to negotiate merely between two factors: his Bengali identity on the one hand and his national belonging to Britain on the other one (Mirze, 189). When Samad moves to London after having fought for the British Army during the Second World War, he supports his identity as a Bengali along with

identifying nationally with the Empire, which has provided him with an education and for which he has fought (Mirze, 189). However, such a negotiation is achieved by never allowing the two contrasting aspects to dialogue and merge with one another, but only to coexist (Mirze, 191). As a consequence, when religion emerges as a further aspect of difference, Samad becomes increasingly split and cannot manage to mediate amongst the multiple and opposing aspects of his identity (Mirze, 192). Unable to cope with the intensifying variations surrounding him, he resolves to cling to religion as a defense against change (Mirze, 192).

Nonetheless, Samad feels he is already corrupted and wonders what he can teach his sons and how he can “show them the straight road when [he] ha[s] lost [his] own bearings” (Smith, 188-189). As a consequence, the more attracted he feels to Poppy, the more resolute he becomes to assure his sons “roots on shore, deep roots that no storm or gale could displace” (Smith, 193). According to Samad roots represent the good and what can be saved (Smith, 193). Hence, believing that it is too late to change his own life, Samad resolves to save at least his own children (Smith, 189). By taking Archibald’s advice, which was actually Mickey-Abdul’s suggestion, Samad decides to send one of his boys back to Bangladesh - he can only afford to send back one because of shortage of money (Smith, 193). At first Samad appears rather undecided and does not know which son to send back (Smith, 194-195). Desperately enough, he even permits Archibald to toss his coin in order to see which one of his children should be taken away (Smith, 196). However, Samad eventually resolves it is Magid to be taken back to Bangladesh (Smith, 196). On the basis of this decision it seems that Samad, despite attempting to negotiate his place within Britain, fears his sons can ultimately be corrupted as he is by negotiating their identities with Western values and thus forces them to adhere to traditional Islamic identities (Beukema, 3). Hence, he does not seem to accept those discontinuities and ruptures within a communal experience, as suggested by Hall’s second model,

and, preventing his wife Alsana to talk about a second generation, he claims there is “[o]ne generation! Invisible! Eternal!” (Smith, 289; Hall 2003, 236). However, despite Samad’s efforts to meticulously control and arrange his twins’ existence under the influence of his belief in determinism, his sons’ lives reveal to be the exact opposite of what he would expect (Sell, 30). His failure seems to prove his wife Alsana right when warning him not to continuously attempt to control their children’s lives since “[one] can’t plan everything” (Smith, 289).

Millat, the son who remains in Britain, while growing up feels increasingly excluded from British society and becomes the leader of a “cultural mongrel” called Raggastani (Beukema, 9; Smith, 231). In 1989, together with his fellow companions, he decides to go to Bradford to join a protest against what they call the ‘dirty book’ (Smith, 233). Even though the book’s title and its author are never openly uttered, many hints within the novel suggest they are referring to Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* (Squires, 32). Millat, despite not having read the book nor knowing anything about its author, resolves to join the demonstration, since “he [knows] other things” (Smith, 233). Everywhere he goes Millat is considered “a Paki no matter where he [comes] from” (Smith, 234): thus, British society, according to Hall’s first model, tends to make Millat coincide with the Pakistani experience without distinguishing between the several ruptures and differences within a common history (see Hall 2003, 234). Further, by thinking that “he should go back to his own country” the Britons also deprive him of his identity as an English citizen, inherited by being born in England (Smith, 234). Hence, Millat knows “he [has] no face in this country, no voice” (Smith, 234). However, when he sees all those other angry young men like him suddenly appearing on every TV channel, newspaper and radio station, demonstrating against a book and its meaning, he recognizes their rage as his own, and, despite not having read the book, decides to join their cause and goes to Bradford to demonstrate (Smith, 234). It is his rage which urges him to grasp his diversity more firmly (Mirze, 196). Like his own father, Millat clings to

religion and in this way strives to reduce his increasing alienation within England (Mirze, 196). Millat's confusion seems to arise because of Magid's departure: in fact, after Magid's leaving, Millat has been living a sort of schizophrenic life, "one foot in Bengal and one in Willesden" (Smith, 219). This condition of disorientation and anger worsens with the passage of time and Millat develops "the feeling of belonging nowhere" (Smith, 269).

In the meantime, Millat is offered to become the head of a fundamentalist Islamic group, KEVIN, which stands for "Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation" (Smith, 295). This group treats religion and politics as "two sides of the same coin" and, as many other extremist factions, it frequently resorts to violence (Smith, 470). Despite the dangers KEVIN may represent, Millat decides to join this group and, as a result, he resolves to embrace his diversity rather than attempting to negotiate between his Bengali identity and English identity (Mirze, 197). Joyce Chalfen herself, who later in the story is asked to look after Millat during an after-school programme, when contemplating Millat's difficult character, considers his "inability to reconcile two opposing cultures" as one of the causes (Smith, 375). Thus, the void Millat is trying to fill by joining KEVIN does not seem to be religious: it is rather a void which needs love (Mirze, 198; Smith, 324). Nevertheless, despite the lack of a complete intellectual adherence to KEVIN's principles, frequently questioned by the other members, Millat for the first time feels he belongs to somewhere (Mirze, 197). Thus, despite being "neither one thing nor the other, this or that, Muslim or Christian, Englishman or Bengali", Millat, by choosing KEVIN and, consequently, the Islamic faith, decides to choose one single component of his identity to prevail over the others (Smith, 351; Mirze, 199). Therefore, it appears that the son who is kept in Britain actually turns into an Islamic extremist.

Magid, conversely, returns from Bangladesh "[m]ore English than the English" (Smith, 406). A few months after Magid's arrival, a cyclone breaks out

in Bangladesh and Magid's parents cannot talk with him for six long days (Smith, 212-213). Magid eventually manages to inform them he is fine and that he has only broken his nose because of a vase fallen down from a shelf in a mosque (Smith, 213). Not only is Samad relieved that he has not hurt himself during the cyclone, he even triumphs when hearing that Magid was in a mosque: he thus suggests "[h]e is learning the old ways" (Smith, 213). Further, he becomes even more exultant when, by reading Magid's letters, Samad discovers his son's ambition to become "a wise man" (Smith, 215).

Nevertheless, Magid later encounters an Indian writer, R.V. Saraswati, who becomes his mentor and teaches him to be "more like the English" (Smith, 288; Mirze, 195). Saraswati claims that the Indians, Bengali and Pakistani too often tend to leave themselves to the mercy of fate, whereas the English tend to struggle against it and do not listen to it "unless it is telling them what they wish to hear" (Smith, 288). Samad is disconcerted by Magid's acquaintance with such a "Rule-Britannia-worshipping Hindu old Queen" (Smith, 289) and tries to contrast his word by claiming that 'Islam' means "*I surrender*", which thus proves human beings' weakness and dependence upon God (Smith, 288). However Alsana criticizes Samad who now "say[s] we have no control, yet [he] always tr[ies] to control everything!" (Smith, 289). Under Saraswati's suggestion, Magid decides to study law in order to become an educated man (Smith, 288). Further, he later even maintains a correspondence with the scientist Marcus Chalfen and praises his work on the FutureMouse, as Marcus calls it, which may "eliminate the random" (Smith, 366). Therefore, despite being distanced from the corruption of the West, Magid does not become the religious man his father would expect; conversely, he embraces Englishness as the constitutive component of his identity, renouncing the possibility of a negotiation between the identity Samad hopes for him and the one Magid finds by himself (Beukema, 10).

On the evidence of Millat's and Magid's lives it appears that the geographical area in which one grows up does not necessarily determine his identity. Ironically, Samad's determinism is discarded by Smith's narration, which turns Millat, the son who remains in England, into an extremist Muslim, whereas Magid, who was supposed to be converted into a pious Muslim, returns from Bangladesh as a secular Englishman (Sell, 30). Samad thus has to recognise his failure, and when asked by Irie what is wrong with him he replies, "[w]hat's right?" (Smith, 405). He acknowledges that both his sons have "lost their way. Strayed so far from the life [he] had intended for them" (Smith, 406). He attempts to justify himself by uttering he only desired two devout Muslim sons (Smith, 406). However, he needs to acknowledge that despite one's efforts "to plan everything" later "nothing happens in the way that [one] expected" (Smith, 407). Samad feels as if he has made "a devil's pact" when entering England, "a place where you are never welcomed, only tolerated", and now he is "unsuitable to return, [his] children are unrecognizable, [he] belong[s] nowhere" (Smith, 407). Totally disoriented, Samad utters that he "begin[s] to believe that birthplaces are accidents, that everything is an *accident*" (Beukema, 4; Smith, 407, emphasis in original). However, he immediately realises that claiming such a thing involves implying that nothing other matters and one would ultimately be lost (Smith, 407). By questioning his own roots, and their importance in establishing identity, Samad reaches the acme of his crisis (Smith, 4). Samad's breakdown appears to stress the significant role played by both roots and routes (Beukema, 4). Feeling completely lost, Samad even questions his roots; however, the awareness of the past is fundamental to understand one's identity (Beukema, 4). Further, it is also essential to negotiate past roots with present routes in order to manage to live in a postcolonial society (Beukema, 1).

Due to Samad's intervention, Magid and Millat grow apart: after they have been separated, their lives have followed completely different routes. However, Irie and Joyce Chalfen feel that they miss one another and that seeing

each other would perhaps help them to better understand who they are (Smith, 406, 434). After Magid's return to England, an empty room is thus arranged for their first encounter after eight years of separation (Smith, 463). Despite the neutrality of this room, however, Magid and Millat fill it with "past, present and future history" (Smith, 464). Even though immigrants are frequently said to be "on the move, footloose, able to change course at any moment", such a thing cannot be said of Magid and Millat (Smith, 465). They leave that room as they had arrived, "weighed down, burdened, unable to waver from their course or in any way change their separate, dangerous trajectories" (Smith, 465). Magid and Millat do not seem to make any advancement (Smith, 465). Further, the more they move forward, the more they realise they embody and utter their own past (Smith, 466). The narrator suggests that the other reality about migration is that immigrants "cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow" (Smith, 466). Such an encounter thus appears to suggest the unavoidability of history (Beukema, 11). Further, it is precisely history which prevents them from advancing: if Magid and Millat once shared common roots, after their parting they have proceeded along opposing routes (Beukema, 11). Consequently, when appealing to their contrasting routes now, they are no longer able to reunify on a same path nor can obviously convince one another to adhere to the other's side (Beukema, 11). Therefore, by failing to understand the necessity of their reliance on a common history and roots, they ultimately leave the room without having made any advancement (Beukema, 11).

In conclusion, if as children Magid and Millat seem capable of relating to one another and to others despite their double national and cultural heritage, while growing up, especially after being separated by their father Samad, they grow apart and begin to follow opposing pathways (Beukema, 8; Thompson, 129). Both of them, like other characters within the novel, when experiencing a conflict between two contrasting components of their identity, renounce the possibility of finding a negotiation and embrace one single component, mainly

an extreme belief, as the main constitutive of their identity (Beukema, 8). When they meet after eight years of separation, despite their efforts to move forward on distinct trajectories, they are unable to progress as a consequence of history, which frequently makes advancement more difficult (Beukema, 11). Magid and Millat's encounter is thus a failure due to their incapability to acknowledge the importance of a shared past: not only are their separate routes fundamental to define their identity, their common roots are as vital too (Beukema, 11). Hence, failing to recognize the necessity of relying on a common history, each one leaves the room stuck in his own position (Beukema, 11). Therefore, not only do they not manage to negotiate the different components within their own identity, they even fail to negotiate their identities between one another. The mistake Samad's sons, and Samad himself, make, is that they believe they can survive by embracing merely one aspect of their identity, when human beings do not necessarily need to choose one single coherent component over the many other aspects of identity (Waldron, quoted in Hall 2006, 314).

#### 2.4.3 Joshua's Rebellion to Chalfenism

Joshua is a school boy the same age as Irie, Magid and Millat, attending their same school, Glenard Oak. He is a very intelligent kid; consequently, other pupils, especially Millat, derides Joshua considering him "a nerd" (Smith, 271). For instance, when the teacher reads sonnet 127 to the class, before explaining it, she first would like them put forward some hypothesis (Smith, 270). Joshua Chalfen, "the only kid in class who volunteer[s] opinions", suggests that the sonnet refers to make-up, used by the Dark Lady even though the Elizabethans privileged a pale complexion (Smith, 270-271). Millat exploits Joshua's clarification to mock him: being Joshua very pallid, Millat utters that the Elizabethans would have adored him (Smith, 271).

Despite Millat's antipathy towards Joshua, however, their paths are destined to intersect. One day a raid is organized at school to find out who smokes illicitly (Smith, 293). Since Millat usually smokes joints, Irie, being desperately in love with him, wants to warn Millat of the raid committee (Smith, 293). While talking with Hifan, the one who introduces Millat to KEVIN, Millat gives his joint to Irie and later forgets to take it off her (Smith, 298). In the meanwhile Irie, leaving Millat and Hifan alone, approaches Joshua, who now asks her some smoke (Smith, 298). While handing the joint to Joshua, the two are reached by Millat, soon followed by the raid committee (Smith, 298). Thus, the three of them are caught "in the very act of marijuana consumption" (Smith, 298). The headmaster of Glenard Oak, in order to teach them a lesson, inquires them to submit to a programme which is "more than punishment. It's constructive" (Smith, 303). Twice a week Irie and Millat are required to go to Joshua's to do after-school homework, focusing mainly on biology and mathematic, which are Joshua's stronger subjects and Irie and Millat's weaker (Smith, 303).

If at first Joshua feels attracted to both Irie and Millat and enjoys being associated with them, being consequently removed from his usual anonymity, with the passage of time he finds the situation unbearable (Smith, 302, 331). Irie is still interested in Millat and even his own mother, Joyce, is now focusing on Millat as if he was the only aim in her life (Smith, 331). Further, it appears that as a consequence of his acquaintance with Millat and Irie, who come from backgrounds different from his own, Joshua starts noticing "the holes in his family's 'perfect' image" (Jakubiak, 204). Hence, he begins to avoid his own parents and distances himself from their convictions and ideas (Smith, 399).

Not only does Joshua attempt not to spend much time with his family, he even comes into contact with an animalist group, FATE, whose acronym stays for 'Fighting Animal Torture and Exploitation' (Smith, 403). FATE is described as an extremist group whose fanatical members struggle against any form of

exploitation of animals even resorting to violence (Smith, 479). After meeting his founder members, Joely and Crispin, and having had a conversation with Joely, Joshua becomes convinced that “his parents [are] assholes, that he himself [is] an asshole, and that the largest community of earth, the animal kingdom, [are] oppressed, imprisoned and murdered on a daily basis with the full knowledge and support of every government in the world” (Smith, 481). Hence, Joshua resolves to join this group. Not even trying to negotiate between his past values and the beliefs he has been initiated to, Joshua decides to reject his parents’ teachings and to embrace FATE’s principles (Smith, 481-482).

If at first Joshua maintains his identity secret and does not reveal that his father is the scientist Marcus Chalfen who is exploiting mice for his research, he subsequently feels the need to disclose the members of FATE his identity (Smith, 482). Despite the initial diffidence and suspicion, he is inquired which side he is on and Joshua, without hesitation, replies FATE’s (Smith, 482). Hence, if initially Joshua simply does not talk to his father and tries to avoid any kind of contact, he later resolves to act in direct opposition to Marcus Chalfen (Smith, 419, 421, 482). Joshua thus begins to openly criticize his parents who “go on about rights and freedoms, and then they eat fifty chickens every fucking week”, which is actually a crime according to FATE (Smith, 403). Further, Joshua becomes convinced that it is only through “extreme behaviour that you can get through to somebody like Marcus” (Smith, 405). Therefore, if as a child Joshua shares his father’s ideas, while growing up not only does he distance himself from his father, he even appears to embrace everything which is the exact opposite of what Marcus Chalfen stands for and believes in (Beukema, 11).

By joining this animalist group Joshua seems to feel as if he has “found [his] niche” (Smith, 403). Consequently, despite being Marcus Chalfen’s son, Joshua helps FATE to plot against his father’s project (Smith, 482). Joshua discloses FATE precious information: for instance, he reveals that despite using

many other mice for his research, the mouse his father is going to display on 31<sup>st</sup> December, as part of his FutureMouse project, is a unique being (Smith, 485). On the basis of this information, the members of FATE decide to concentrate their attention on the mouse and its release rather than on Marcus: since there are no other mice like that one, once the mouse on display has been rescued, Marcus consequently becomes inoffensive (Smith, 484).

However, the more 31<sup>st</sup> December approaches, the more Joshua becomes conscious FATE is planning his father's downfall and begins to question himself about the consequences of his actions (Smiths, 482-483). He begins to realise that throughout the last three months he has stopped analyzing and evaluating happenings according to his parents' way of thinking and this appears the reason why he has not considered the outcome of his actions (Smith, 491). Further, he has never thought he may have betrayed his father; however, when he hears Crispin ridiculing Chalfenism in front of him, he acknowledges he has: as a result, he suddenly regrets having revealed Crispin their tendency to refer to themselves and define their thoughts and actions "as verbs, nouns and adjectives" (Smith, 494). As a consequence, on 31<sup>st</sup> December he would prefer to be celebrating New Year's Eve, together with the "conflict-free people", rather than heading towards the Perret Institute where his father's project is going to be presented and displayed (Smith, 495).

Further, when Joely compliments herself with Joshua for his determination and calmness, despite his own father's involvement, Joshua becomes convinced that it is more inertia rather than calm (Smith, 495-496). He consequently wonders whether he is right in letting "events take their course" or ought to be "[m]ore proactive in the face of the future" (Smith, 496). He realises that he has never been good at taking extreme decisions, neither when he was younger, since "choices need time, the *fullness* of time", and being time "the horizontal axis of morality", when one makes up his mind he then has to wait in order to see the outcome of his choice (Smith, 496; emphasis in original). Thus,

Joshua has always been much more cerebral; however, when joining FATE he seems to demonstrate the exact opposite attitude (Smith, 497). Nevertheless, as he used to dread the consequences of his decisions before, he fears them now (Smith, 497). He begins to realise that the outcome of his recent choices is unthinkable and “he [cannot] imagine a moment occurring after that act. Only blankness. Nothingness” (Smith, 497). He ultimately acknowledges that “you don’t happen to the world” but rather “the world happens to you” (Smith, 497). Therefore, for the first time he becomes entirely convinced that one cannot control the world and its developments through his own decisions and actions (Smith, 497). Such a conclusion seems to represent the very opposite of his father’s beliefs (Smith, 497).

In conclusion, if as a child Joshua seems able to construct his identity in relation rather than in opposition to the other characters his age, negotiating between his family’s ideals and others’ behaviour and beliefs, while growing up he becomes increasingly incapable of a negotiation (Beukema, 8). Growing apart from his own father, who personifies Chalfenism, and feeling an increasing pressure from part of his beliefs, Joshua is led to embrace the direct opposite of what Marcus Chalfen believes in, without even attempting to “[take] things apart to see how they [fit] together” (Beukema, 11; Smith, 481-482). However, he soon finds himself caught “[b]etween rocks and hard places”, i.e. between his previous beliefs, mainly shaped by Chalfenism, and FATE (Smith, 497). Hence, despite his initial unawareness of the consequences of his recent choices, he suddenly realises that both Chalfenism and FATE, which equally embody extreme positions, require proactivity. Joshua, conversely, appears to have always allowed the world to follow its course, preferring inertia to proactivity (Smith, 496). As a result, he ultimately becomes fully conscious of his belief that “the world happens to you” and not the opposite (Smith, 497). Therefore, as a consequence of his inability to successfully negotiate between his childhood identity and the new ideals he has been initiated to, he appears to

be caught in a binary: on the one hand, together with the members of FATE, he is attempting to control and determine the failure of his father's project; on the other hand, he seems to acknowledge the pointlessness of any effort, both Marcus's and FATE's, to control and shape the developments of the world.

## 2.5 Socially and Genetically Constructed Heritages

Within *White Teeth*, the past does not only present itself under the form of a historical, racial or cultural heritage, it also reappears through socially and genetically constructed heritages. British colonial past and Nazi eugenics rematerialize respectively through Joyce Chalfen's experiment of a socially constructed heritage and Marcus Chalfen's genetically engineered project (Groß, 46; McMann, 619).

Thus, it should not be surprising to notice that the headmaster of Glenard Oak's resolution to subject Irie and Millat to an after-school programme at the Chalfens' is separated from Joyce's actual presentation by a digression narrating the colonial past and social experiment of the founder of Glenard Oak, Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard (Dalleo, 98-99). Glenard was a colonist who, after enriching in Jamaica, decided to return to England bringing with him a group of Jamaicans as part of a social and cultural experiment of mutual exchange between Englishmen and Jamaicans (Smith, 304-305). Therefore, the headmaster of the school, sharing Glenard's ideals, embarks on a social project (Dalleo, 99). Joyce herself, in accepting the headmaster's task, seems to reveal a similar enthusiasm for the possibilities offered by cultural and social mixing (Smith, 309).

As far as Joyce's husband, the scientist Marcus Chalfen, is concerned, it does not seem to be surprising if his mentor is a Nazi eugenicist, Dr Marc-Pierre Perret, who is said to be wanting "to control, to dictate the future", since "men

like him believe that living organs should answer to design” (Smith, 119). Unlike Nazi eugenics, however, Marcus does not appear to be interested in using his experiment to recombine human beings’ DNA, but rather to improve life expectancy and to find a cure against cancer (Smith, 419). Nevertheless, by taking a mouse and removing any casual development, Marcus intentionally determine the mouse’s life trajectory, as Nazis wanted to do with human beings (Beukema, 8). Therefore, despite Perret’s and Marcus’s different objectives, the novel still appears to voluntarily shape a relationship between Dr Perret’s eugenic experiments and Marcus’s genetically engineered FutureMouse (McMann, 619).

### 2.5.1 Joyce’s Experiment of a Socially Constructed Heritage

As mentioned above, Joyce’s mission to help Irie and Millat during their afternoon study seems to recall their school founder’s colonial experiment to favour a social and cultural exchange between Englishmen and Jamaicans (Smith, 305; Groß, 46). While living in Jamaica, Sir Edmund Glenard has always been surprised by the Jamaicans’ religious enthusiasm, which, according to him, Englishmen lack (Smith, 305). Conversely, he has frequently been disappointed by the Jamaicans’ indolence and lacking education, which are not characteristic of Englishmen, whose education and work ethic Glenard has always admired (Smith, 305). Hence, when arranging his journey back home, Glenard suddenly realises “he [is] in a position to influence the situation” (Smith, 305). He thus decides to ship hundreds of Jamaicans to London, aiming to a mutual exchange between Jamaicans and Englishmen: the English are expected to teach Jamaicans how to work, whereas Jamaicans are supposed to teach the English how to prey and worship the Lord (Smith, 305-306). However, despite the initial partial success, the experiment ultimately fails (Smith, 306).

Glenard's funds soon end and the business rapidly worsens: as a consequence, the English resolve to leave and go to work elsewhere, whereas the Jamaicans are left by their own (Smith, 307). As a consequence, some Jamaicans die of hunger, some others are convicted for crimes they commit in order to survive, yet others move to working class districts (Smith, 307). The dramatic failure of this experiment seems to suggest that “[a] legacy is not something you can give or take by choice”, as Glenard would like to (Smith, 307).

The headmaster of Glenard Oak's decision to punish Irie, Millat and Joshua for smoking marijuana by arranging an after-school programme of study at the Chalfens' may remind the reader of Sir Edmund Glenard's project (Dalleo, 99): the headmaster aims in fact to a mutual help amongst the schoolchildren (Smith, 303). He appears excited at the idea of “[b]ringing children of disadvantaged or minority backgrounds into contact with kids who might have something to offer them” (Smith, 308). When accepting the task she is given, Joyce herself appears to share the headmaster's belief that social and cultural mixing can have positive effects (Smith, 309). Her thought upon this subject is revealed through her works on gardening: “[i]n the garden, as in the social and political arena, change should be the only constant”, since “more varied offspring [...] are better able to cope with a changed environment” (Smith, 309). Not only does Joyce seem to favour mixing, she even appears to suggest the “need to create gardens of diversity and interest”: hence, such a claim is likely to imply her will to shape and control beings' development, despite the risky consequences it may involve (Smith, 310).

Nevertheless, despite Joyce's enthusiasm for “more varied offspring”, she still seems to highlight Millat and Irie's diversity (Smith, 309; Dalleo, 100). For instance, when they enter her house for the first time, noting how exotic they look, Joyce inquires where they come from (Smith, 319). Being both of them born in Willesden, they do not even imagine she may refer to their parents' homeland (Smith, 319). However, Joyce does not seem satisfied with their

answer and explicitly asks them “but where *originally?*”, as if their exotic appearance could make them less English than she is, despite being born in the UK like Joyce herself (Smith, 319). Further, when observing Millat, she immediately believes his parents must have already arranged a marriage for him, according to Muslim traditions; additionally, she seems surprised to notice Millat is not as meek and silent as Muslims usually are (Smith, 320). Thus, Joyce tends to judge him on the basis of a stereotyped view of Islamism, without considering that, being Millat himself born in the UK, he may not differ much from any other child his age. Further, by stressing Millat’s “very difficult background”, Joyce seems to highlight his need for a proper upbringing and education which appear to have been neglected so far (Smith, 330). In addition to highlighting Millat and Irie’s diversity, Joyce also seems to stress her family’s superiority. For instance, she continuously emphasizes her husband’s intelligence, comparing him to “a strong sunbeam” which shines on his children both during the day and at night (Smith, 324). Thus, the Chalfens’ four children seem to be as brilliant as their parents: Joshua has a talent for mathematics, Benjamin would like to become a geneticist like Marcus, Jack has a passion for psychiatry and the youngest, Oscar, is said to be easily able to beat his father in chess (Smith, 313). Therefore, on the one hand, Joyce tends to stress Millat and Irie’s diversity (Dalleo, 100); on the other hand, she appears to highlight the Chalfens’ good genes and intelligence (Smith, 354).

Joyce’s attitude is likely to recall colonialism: Britain used to affirm its identity and, consequently, superiority, by stressing the colonies’ otherness, as Joyce does (see Marzola, 56). Further, on the basis of its alleged supremacy, Britain used to spread the features and values representing its culture amongst its colonies (Dolce, 173). Hence, Joyce’s attitude of superiority over Millat and Irie can be compared to the colonists’ position of predominance over the colonized. Hence, it should not be surprising to notice that, in addition to narrating Sir Glenard’s colonial experiment, *White Teeth* also refers to another colonist,

Charlie Durham, who is convinced “natives require instruction, Christian faith and moral guidance” (Smith, 358).

On the basis of Joyce’s description, it appears that in addition to favouring social and cultural mixing, she is also likely to have “retained a (post-) colonial missionary zeal” (Groß, 46). As a result, when Irie and Millat enter her house Joyce feels attracted to them. At their arrival, Joyce is looking after her plants, one of which is affected by insects (Smith, 316). As a consequence of her gardening activity, after observing the two schoolchildren for a while, she realises that “there [is] damage here” and appears to associate Irie and Millat to her ill plant (Smith, 324). According to Joyce, Irie lacks self-esteem, has an uncultivated brain and suffers the absence of a paternal figure; Millat, on the other hand, is characterized by sorrow, loss and wounds which seem in need of love (Smith, 324). Since their very first encounter Joyce has a predilection for Millat: hence, she does not seem to be much interested in Irie’s improvements, she is rather more concerned with Millat’s behavioural problems (Smith, 334-335). Therefore, Millat is likely to become her primary mission.

However, despite the Chalfens’ ability “to bring the right things out in people” (Smith, 325), as suggested by their eldest son Joshua, Joyce’s efforts to help Millat do not appear to be effective. Even though he is spending some of his time with the Chalfens, Millat still smokes marijuana, on Sunday nights calls on to the Chalfens’ despite not being invited, brings there girls, drinks the Chalfens’ champagne, arranges KEVIN’s meetings at their house, insults and threatens any member of the family (Smith, 334-335). Thus, Millat seems to progress little (Jakubiak, 204): contrarily to the headmaster’s expectations, not even his grades have improved (Smith, 344); conversely, Millat seems to have become even more bewildered and reinforces his relationship with KEVIN (Jakubiak, 204).

Joyce becomes increasingly convinced Millat needs to meet and face his twin in order to resolve his predicaments (Smith, 434). The twins have been

separated for eight long years, but Magid is now back from Bangladesh thanks to Marcus Chalfen's intervention; thus, Joyce feels it is time Magid and Millat confront one another, because she cannot "just sit back and watch them tear themselves apart" (Smith, 434, 436). Joyce thus goes to the Iqbals' to talk to the twins' mother, Alsana, in order to express her belief Magid and Millat should face one another (Smith, 442). Alsana, who has never tolerated the Chalfens, accuses Joyce of having split her sons apart (Smith, 442). Joyce, however, thinks that the Iqbals' predicaments started before her family was involved; further, she adds that her own family has been divided by Millat's problematic situation, which appears to have led Joshua to distance himself from his father and his beliefs (Smith, 443). Therefore, she seems to suggest that if she is at the Iqbals' talking to Alsana, it is for the benefit of both their families and she states that the first step forward can be made by making the twins meet each other (Smith, 443). Despite their initial hostility to this encounter, Magid and Millat eventually meet; however, as already seen in a previous paragraph, they do not make any advancement (Smith, 465). Joyce seems to have underestimated that "[w]orst of all [is] the anger inside [Millat]": whatever the issue is, either God or the West, Marcus Chalfen's project or his brother's new beliefs, he is "determined to prove himself, determined to run the clan, determined to beat the rest" (Smith, 447). Therefore it is not surprising that, irritated by Marcus's debateable ethics and scientific beliefs, Millat even attempts to assassinate Dr Perret, Marcus's mentor, during the presentation of Marcus Chalfen's genetically constructed mouse (Jakubiak, 204).

In conclusion, it appears that even though Joyce strives to improve and consequently shape Millat's behaviour and, ultimately, identity, eventually she does not manage to achieve her objective. Like Sir Edmund Glenard who has purposely tried to determine a different attitude in both Englishmen and Jamaicans, Joyce herself has attempted to direct and shape Millat's identity. Nonetheless, Joyce's efforts result pointless, since one's identity and life cannot

be shaped on purpose, as both Joyce's and Sir Glenard's experience prove: thus, it is not a coincidence that both Joyce's programme and Glenard's project fail, because of the impossibility to give or receive a heritage at will. Therefore, on the evidence of this, it is possible to claim that the attempt to determine and control the construction of a social and cultural heritage is futile. Even though the unavailability and potentially positive impact of mixing cannot be denied, it is equally true that efforts to purposely influence and direct a mixed heritage can prove not only fruitless, but even tragic, as demonstrated by both Glenard's and Joyce's social projects (Dalleo, 101; Jakubiak, 204).

#### 2.5.2 Marcus Chalfen's FutureMouse Project: a Genetically Constructed Heritage

As already suggested, Marcus Chalfen's FutureMouse project appears to recall the Nazi eugenicist Marc-Pierre Perret's experiments: despite the many differences between genetic engineering and eugenics, Smith's novel still seems to establish a connection between these two fields (McMann, 619-620). Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret used to work for the Nazis since before the Second World War: he is described as a talented French prodigy who has mainly focused on "the sterilization programme, and later the euthanasia policy. Internal German matters" (Smith, 106). Once Nazism begins to approach its downfall, however, the eugenicist attempts to hide in order not to be found. It is while concealing himself that his path intersects Archibald and Samad's (Smith, 115). Samad, who hopes the war can be his chance "to [go] home covered in glory", with something "he could one day tell his children about, as his great-grandfather's exploits had been told to him", when realizing that the war is over and he has missed his opportunity, he is extremely disappointed (Smith, 105, 109). However, when they ultimately discover where the French doctor is hiding, Samad becomes convinced this is his last chance to cover himself with glory

(Smith, 118). In order to convince Archibald “[they] need blood on [their] hands”, Samad reveals Archibald what the Russian soldiers seeking Perret have told him (Smith, 118). Perret is said to aim at controlling and determining human beings’ lives, pursuing “a race of men, a race of indestructible men, that will survive the last days of this earth” (Smith, 119). Therefore, on the basis of such a description, it appears that Perret believes in the possibility of manipulating and supervising human beings’ lives, which can thus be predetermined.

Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret’s works can be easily compared and associated with Marcus Chalfen’s experiments (McMann, 619): Marcus himself, by manipulating ova and genes, “*create[s] beings*” which respond to his own designs (Smith, 311, 312; emphasis in original). Thus, it should not be surprising to discover that Marcus’s mentor is precisely the eugenicist Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret: when conversing with Irie about his FutureMouse project, Marcus reveals to have a mentor, a “grand old Frenchman, a gentleman and a scholar” who is in his seventies and has taught Marcus what he knows (Smith, 337). The reader may perhaps already suppose that Marcus is referring to Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret, however, it is only towards the end of the novel that Marcus officially presents Perret as his mentor (Smith, 532).

Therefore, on the basis of the relationship between Marcus and Perret, it seems possible to find similarities between genetic engineering and human eugenics, despite Marcus’s hostility to such a connection (Smith, 418-419). Even though Marcus aims to favour the advancements of medicine to improve human life, and is thus not interested in social or political control as Nazis used to, the possibility to manipulate genetics is still source of controversies (McMann, 620). In fact, people commenting on Marcus’s project usually focus on the risks the control of a mouse’s life and future may lead to, rather than on the developments of medicine (Smith, 419). For instance, when waiting for Magid Iqbal’s return from Bangladesh at Heathrow Airport, Marcus encounters

an Asian young woman reading a copy of a book he has collaborated to by writing an article on genetic engineering (Smith, 415-416). Marcus thus asks her whether she likes her reading, and the young woman replies that “it’s scary, isn’t it, all this genetic engineering” (Smith, 417). Marcus is rather puzzled and wants her to clarify her point. Thus, the Asian young woman continues saying that once scientists know which enzyme can constitute a specific segment of DNA, they are consequently capable of controlling human beings’ genetic constitution (Smith, 417). She then claims that one has to be quite ingenuous not to consider that the West may be interested in using genetic engineering in the East, in order to reduce problems such as fundamentalist Islamism (Smith, 417). The Asian girl suggests that she does not doubt governments would exploit these new advancements in order to “eliminate ‘undesirable’ qualities in people” and states that “there’s just something a little fascist about the whole deal” (Smith, 418). Being Indian, the young woman is preoccupied that in the future scientists may desire to create “[m]illions of blonds with blue eyes” (Smith, 418). After having expressed her anxieties concerning genetic engineering, she also directs her attention to the FutureMouse project itself, aiming to criticize it: despite not being religious, the young woman claims to believe in the sanctity of living beings’ life and consequently thinks that programming the whole life of a mouse is unnatural (Smith, 418).

Marcus, however, has never referred to the recombination of DNA within his article; therefore, he is surprised that the Asian young woman may have read the book by entirely associating it to the field of human genetics (Smith, 419). Thus, people’s attention is usually grasped by the mouse’s predetermined future and its risky consequences rather than by the possibility to determine and control the ageing of cells and the development of a cancer, which are actually Marcus’s primary concerns (Smith, 419). Marcus Chalfen’s experiment, in fact, focuses mainly on the analysis of the progression of carcinomas (Smith, 339): his project consists in reengineering genomes, in order to make a tumour develop in certain

tissues according to Marcus's plans and calculations (Smith, 340). By "eliminating the random actions of a mutagen", Marcus aims to be in control of the advance of a tumour (Smith, 340-341). Consequently, the FutureMouse is fully programmed. Marcus's mouse is thus expected to develop a pancreatic carcinomas at the end of its first year of life (Smith, 432). Then, after another year, an oncogene contained in the mouse's skin cells is projected to appear under the form of benign papillomas (Smith, 432). After four other years, the mouse is supposed to lose its capacity to create melanin and turns thus white (Smith, 432). The FutureMouse is ultimately expected to die seven years after the beginning of the experiment (Smith, 432). Hence, Marcus is convinced his project can possibly "slow the process of disease, control the process of ageing and eliminate genetic defect" (Smith, 433). According to Marcus, the possibility of eliminating random and of controlling human life's developments may perhaps open "a new phase in human history" (Smith, 433). However, Marcus himself seems to betray his beliefs and ideals when revealing Irie, who works for him as a secretary, that once the random has been eliminated, a person can "rule the world" and can thus "program every step in the development of an organism: reproduction, food habits, life expectancy" (Smith, 341). Therefore, despite aspiring to support the improvement of medicine, Marcus himself acknowledges the implied consequences of genetic engineering and appears to be fascinated by the possibilities genetic control provides science with (McMann, 621).

Nonetheless, Marcus's public purpose remains the improvement of human life and the search for a therapy against cancer (McMann, 622). Nevertheless, many of the people commenting on his project tend to stress their attention on the mouse itself, failing to consider it as an opportunity to study and analyse genetic inheritance, the advancement of illnesses and the probabilities of mortality (Smith, 419). Thus, unsurprisingly, many of the people gathered at Perret Institute on 31<sup>st</sup> December aim to criticize and oppose Chalfen's project.

The members of KEVIN, for instance, believe that Marcus's project has nothing to do with medicine, but rather consists in modifying and adjusting Allah's creatures (Smith, 475). Further, KEVIN fear that once Marcus has terminated his experiments on mice, he will devote to the creation of human beings (Smith, 475). Even Irie's grandmother, Hortense, makes her appearance at Perret Institute accompanied by other Jehovah's Witnesses (Smith, 528): having based her entire life on faith and religion, she is likely to associate Marcus to "dem who rejek [de Lord] at de peril of dem souls" and consequently condemns his project (Smith, 530). FATE too is taking position against Marcus's project: the animalist group severely condemns the exploitation of animals and is thus contrary to Marcus's experimentations on mice (Smith, 476). Even the Joneses and the Iqbals participate to the presentation of Marcus Chalfen's project: despite their initial aversion to the idea of going to Perret Institute, Alsana ultimately decides they are all going, "whether they liked it or not. And they didn't" (Smith, 512).

While Marcus presents his project, each one of the characters gathered at Perret Institute meditates on the trajectory of their life and on the reasons which have brought them there. Joshua, for instance, dreads FATE may have underestimated Chalfenism and its devotion to reason (Smith, 524). Millat, in the meanwhile, thinks about the gun he is carrying inside his pocket (Smith, 525). This is supposed to be his occasion to revenge his family past history: if Mangal Pande was considered a traitor by the English, whereas his executioner was believed to be a hero, Millat now wants "[t]o turn that history around" (Smith, 506). Consequently, "[i]f Marcus Chalfen was going to write his name all over the world, Millat was going to write it BIGGER" (Smith, 506; emphasis in original). Meantime Irie, while listening to Marcus's presentation and his belief in the possibilities offered by science, is led to reflect on the paternity of her child and ultimately concludes that "there are things the human eye cannot detect" (Smith, 527). When Marcus introduces his mentor, Dr. Marc-Pierre

Perret, Archibald's and Samad's eyes turn to the doctor whom Archibald was supposed to execute during the war (Smith, 532-533). "[W]ith no more reason or rhyme than the first time", Archibald places himself between the trajectory of Millat's gun and his objective and rescues the doctor again, taking the bullet right in his thigh (Smith, 533, 540). Falling down, Archibald hits the box where the FutureMouse is contained; consequently, the mouse is thus released and escapes from the room (Smith, 540-542).

In conclusion, even though Marcus Chalfen, unlike Nazi eugenics, is not interested in exploiting his research to recombine human beings' DNA, the novel still establishes a connection between his genetically modified mouse and the Nazi eugenicist Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret's experiments (McMann, 619). By taking a mouse and eliminating any arbitrary future development, Marcus purposely shape and determine the mouse's life trajectory (Beukema, 8). Despite Marcus's commitment to medicine and to the search for a therapy against cancer, he himself has to acknowledge the consequences the elimination of chance may lead to, such as the possibility to rule and control humankind (Smith, 341). However, Marcus's endeavours to predetermine and supervise the FutureMouse's ageing and cancer development stages are nullified by the escape of the mouse itself (Beukema, 8). Even though the mouse's existence has already been predetermined, by breaking free and disappearing the mouse submits to chance and random: thus, its future becomes uncertain and unpredictable (Thompson, 135). Therefore, Marcus's belief in the possibility to construct and determine definite and predictable past roots and future routes is challenged by the mouse's liberation and subsequent escape (Thompson, 134-135). Hence, Marcus's certainty concerning the mouse's future developments is ultimately casted into doubt, implying that even the character that possesses "a completely reliable ontology and teleology", Marcus's genetically engineered mouse, can be subject to chance and random (Thompson, 134, 135).

## 2.6 Archibald, the FutureMouse and Irie's Child: the Predominance of Chance and Ambivalence over Certainty and Determinism

The characters analysed so far are caught between binaries as a consequence of their efforts to purposely determine their own and others' identity and life trajectories (Paproth, 9; Childs, 211). Their desire to shape stable and uncomplicated individual identities, interpersonal relationships and life developments makes them unable to negotiate between conflicting components. As a result, they tend to cling to one single coherent aspect of identity and life, rejecting other elements which are likely to be subjected to chance (Paproth, 9-10). Samad, for instance, fights ambiguity by clinging to historical and religious determinism (Erll, 177-178; Sell, 30), whereas Irie tries to escape the randomness of her family history by firstly blending with Chalfenism and later sticking to the "blankness of the past" (Smith, 402). Irie also has difficulties in negotiating between her English and Jamaican racial heritage, thus strives to control her biological roots by clinging to the former (Thompson, 127). Irie's mother, Clara, attempts to escape Hortense's religious fanaticism by rejecting her faith and adhering to atheism, whereas Samad's sons react to their father's religiosity by either strictly adhering to Islamism (Millat) or entirely rejecting it (Magid). Furthermore, the Chalfens attempt to eliminate randomness by determining either a socially constructed heritage (Joyce) or genetically engineered roots (Marcus). However, their own son, Joshua, entirely rejects Chalfenism and its beliefs and ultimately clings to an animalist group. Hence, Smith's characters appear incapable to live in a fractured world where life and identity are increasingly unpredictable and unstable (Paproth, 9). As a consequence of their inability to cope with the ambivalence and randomness of

life, they struggle to define and fix their own and others' lives and identity (Paproth, 9-10; Childs, 211).

Nevertheless, the characters' efforts to control and shape their own and others' individual identity and future life are contrasted with the unpredictability of life (Childs, 211). Additionally, there are also characters within Smith's novel who seem to oppose coherency and determinism. Archibald Jones is one of these (Bentley, 498). Despite being born in England, Archibald appears to contrast with the prototype of English masculinity promoted by the Empire, which tends to be permeated by imperialistic values (Beukema, 3-4). Thus, instead of relying on established ideologies, Archibald is characterized by an "impotent indecision" (Smith, 11) and is thus "never able to make a decision, never able to state a position", unless by flipping a coin (Smith, 53). Samad himself criticizes Archibald's incapability to stand "for a faith", "for a politics", "even for your country" (Smith, 120-121). Paradoxically, Samad is the one who fights more tenaciously during the war, defending "a country that [isn't] his" own, whereas Archibald, who is English by birth, "[can] feel nothing comparable to it" (Smith, 95). As a consequence of Archibald's hesitant attitude towards life, not only does he seem to embody indecision, but rootlessness too: he thus appears to exemplify, more than other characters, the characteristic features of "the not-quite-not-white Englishman" (Beukema, 4). Furthermore, Archibald's reliance on randomness and sudden choices, rather than a belief in secure and stable ideologies, challenges the several forms of determinism Smith's novel is inhabited by (Bentley, 498). The novel's fundamentalisms are thus defied through Archibald's act of tossing a coin (Bentley, 498): "he always [wants] advice, he [is] a huge fan of second opinions. That's why he never [goes] anywhere without a ten pence coin" (Smith, 25).

Hence, it should not be astonishingly that Archibald's decision to commit suicide, which opens the novel, is determined precisely by flipping a coin (Smith, 3). "[S]uicide takes guts. It's for heroes and martyrs, truly vainglorious

men. Archie [is] none of these” (Smith, 11). Archibald seems thus to trust chance more than intentional choices. However, he does not manage to commit suicide as a consequence of the intervention of Mo Hussein, a butcher in front of whose shop Archie has parked his car to end his life (Smith, 6). As a result of Mo Hussein’s casual interference, Archibald is given a second chance: hence, “[s]omewhere, somehow, by somebody, it had been decided that he would live” (Smith, 4). Not only does Archibald toss a coin to decide upon his life, he flips it also to help his friend Samad to decide which son to send back to Bangladesh (Smith, 196). Further, when eight years later Magid, who had been sent to Bangladesh, returns to England, Archibald tosses his coin again to suggest whether Magid should encounter his twin (Smith, 457). Archibald exploits his coin also to decide whether to execute the Nazi eugenicist Dr. Perret (Smith, 539): in fact, even though the doctor shoots Archibald in the thigh, taking advantage of Archibald’s distraction while observing the arc of the coin, Archibald ultimately resolves not to kill the doctor as a result of the flipping of his coin (Smith, 540). Moreover, when the doctor reappears towards the end of the novel during the presentation of Marcus Chalfen’s genetically engineered mouse, Archibald saves him for the second time, but “with no more reason or rhyme than the first time” (Smith, 540): thus, Archibald’s decision is instinctive and accidental, as any other choice he has made in his life (Beukema, 6).

Hence, on the basis of the previous examples, it is possible to claim that Archibald does not take any decision by intentionally determining it; rather, he prefers to trust randomness and usually makes choices by tossing a coin (Bentley, 498). Archibald’s reliance on chance thus appears to suggest his disbelief in the possibility of purposely shaping and determining subjective identity and life trajectories. Nevertheless, despite Archibald’s inability to side with, he is yet “the unlikely hero of the book”: Archibald’s failure in taking decisions is used by Smith to challenge the other characters’ belief in determinism and fixed ideologies (Bentley, 498). Furthermore, Smith’s choice to

designate an Englishman by birth as the major believer in chance should not be underestimated: such a decision seems to suggest the necessity of a negotiation between traditional and new emerging forms of English masculinity and national identity (Bentley, 498). Archibald, despite being frequently undecided and appearing even rootless, still contains a remainder of English identity (Bentley, 498). Through his character Smith thus seems to imply that emerging forms of individual and national identity should be the result of a negotiation with, rather than a rejection of, traditional forms of identity (Bentley, 498).

Archibald is not the only one who seems to oppose the other characters' attempts to influence and shape identity and life. Even Marcus Chalfen's FutureMouse ultimately appears to offer an escape from determinism (Bentley, 500). Even though the life of the mouse is entirely planned and predetermined, when Archibald rescues Dr. Perret from being shot during the presentation of Chalfen's project, Archibald accidentally liberates the mouse, thus allowing it a possibly different life (Smith, 540-541; Sell, 31). Moreover, once Archibald realises that the mouse is running away, he thinks, "*Go on my son!*" (Smith, 542), demonstrating once again his devotion to chance (Sell, 30, 31). Hence, by supporting the mouse's escape Archibald appears to express his wish for much more spontaneous and unplanned life forms (Beukema, 6). Therefore, despite the impossibility of avoiding its genetically constructed heritage, which makes its life predestined, by escaping the mouse still has the chance to submit to a random existence (Bentley, 500; Thompson, 135). By breaking free, the mouse eventually challenges the scientists who have first constructed it and subsequently want to maintain it behind bars, in order to supervise its changes (Bentley, 500). In brief, even though the mouse possesses manufactured roots and predetermined routes, which make its existence much more certain and reliable than other characters' origin and life trajectories, its disappearance makes its future unpredictable (Thompson, 135).

Another character who appears to constitute an escape from determinism is Irie's not yet born child (Bentley, 500). Having slept with both Millat and Magid, Irie cannot know who the father of her baby is (Bentley, 500). As a consequence, "Irie's child can never be mapped exactly, nor spoken of with any certainty" (Smith, 527). Irie and her own child should thus learn to accept the impossibility of determining a fixed and stable origin since Irie cannot go back to the moment in which the spermatozoon has impregnated the ovum (Smith, 527). Consequently, Irie can neither control nor uncover "her body's decision", which has actually been determined by chance (Smith, 515). Therefore, being her child's origin untraceable, her baby may perhaps embody an evasion from both the characters many attempts to control their historical, racial or religious roots and the Chalfens' efforts to determine either a socially or genetically constructed heritage (McMann, 633). Thus, Irie's not yet born child challenges both biology and science (McMann, 633).

In conclusion, the characters' attempts to escape ambivalence and randomness by shaping their own or others' existence are challenged by characters who either trust or represent the unpredictability of life (see Childs, 211). One of the main male protagonists, Archibald Jones, is unable to intentionally decide what to do and thus tends to resolve his predicaments by tossing a coin, thereby trusting randomness (Bentley, 498). If Archibald shapes his life trajectories by trusting chance, both the FutureMouse and Irie's child seem to represent the unpredictability of life. Being accidentally liberated by Archibald himself, Marcus's mouse can escape, thus opening its existence to unplanned and unpredictable twists (Bentley, 500). As far as Irie's unborn child is concerned, the baby is destined to embody chance, as a consequence of the impossibility of retracing his origin (Bentley, 500). Therefore, Archibald, the FutureMouse and Irie's child may be connected because of the predominance of casualness over determinism in their lives (Bentley, 500-501).

## 2.7 Conclusion

On the evidence of their respective stories, Smith's characters appear to constantly strive to control and determine their own, and sometimes even others', identity and life (see Childs, 211). When dealing with the different simultaneous components or possibilities identity is exposed to, they inevitably try to define an unambiguous self, ignoring the fact that such an attitude does not work any longer in a postmodern world (see Bauman 2012a, 27). Thus, their mistake consists in the attempt to define their own or others' identity univocally, without accepting the concomitant presence of ambivalent values and beliefs (see Paproth, 9-10). However, the truth is that identity is simultaneously exposed to several components, which need to be negotiated by the self (Bauman 2012a, 13).

Ambivalent components of identity become even more difficult to be handled by characters who are mixed-race or whose parents are immigrants: not only are they required to accept the condition of postmodernity, they also need to come to terms with the legacies of the British colonial experience. However, nowadays "we are all hybrid post-colonials"; therefore, the pursuit of unambiguous identities is futile (Head, 114). On the evidence of *White Teeth's* thematic issues, in fact, such a quest is condemned (see Thompson, 135), and characters whose existence is subject to chance and characterized by ambivalence ultimately reveal more successful than those who constantly attempt to fix their own, or others', life and identity (see Bentley, 498, 500).

On the basis of Smith's characters, a further consideration can be made: if the British self is increasingly ambivalent and incoherent, as the characters' unsuccessful struggles prove, the quest for homogeneity would be pointless not only for individuals but for nations too (Mirze, 200). Thus, the ambiguous British self inevitably challenges a traditional representation of Englishness too. In fact, as a consequence of the impossibility "to find one pure person [...] on

the globe” (Smith, 236), Englishness itself cannot be represented coherently, and consequently needs to be rethought (see Bentley, 501). Therefore, the condition of ambivalence and fragmentation, which characterizes the British self, may be distinctive of 20<sup>th</sup>-century multicultural England too. Hence, Smith can be said to imply that the search for a uniform identity is useless not only for the self but for national identity too (Mirze, 200); a negotiation would thus be desirable not only for the British self, but also for Englishness (see Thompson, 135; see Bentley, 498).

Therefore, on the basis of *White Teeth*'s main themes, it may be claimed that external factors such as the condition of postmodernity and the legacies of the colonial experience prevent the British self from shaping a coherent and pure identity as it used to. The lack of uniform, homogeneous identities which characterizes a postmodern, postcolonial self, inevitably affects the construction of other kinds of identity, such as national identity: as previously suggested, in fact, it follows that, just as the British self, Englishness cannot be constructed coherently either (Mirze, 200).

### 3. The Ambiguity and Fragmentation of *White Teeth*'s Form

#### 3.1 Introduction

Smith's characters tragic pursuit of a stable and fixed identity in a postmodern and postcolonial world seems to point out the author's disagreement with a binary understanding of the world (Paproth, 10). Smith appears to be in favour of a postmodernist viewpoint: she thus tends to sweep away established ways of understanding life, generally used by human beings to define their identity and make sense of their existence (Paproth, 10). As a consequence, the characters' different forms of determinism and fundamentalist approach to life prove unsuccessful (Paproth, 10).

Contrary to expectations, however, the devices and techniques deployed by Smith are not always as contemporary as the novel's subject matter: apart from few devices such as tables, diagrams and lists, which can be classified as postmodern, the dominant mode within *White Teeth* does not appear to be postmodernism (Bentley, 497). Smith's novel cannot be easily labelled either: even though there are formal aspects which are recognizably realist, there are also elements which are more experimental and reflect the influence of modernism (Bentley, 497). *White Teeth* thus appears to oscillate between tradition and innovation from a stylistic perspective.

Consequently, it may be useful to analyse the novel from a formal perspective. In order to do so, realism should first be considered in order to list its characteristic features and understand which aspects within Smith's novel

may be labelled as realist. Once realism has been analysed, it can be worthwhile to consider modernism in order to detect those elements within the novel which detach from tradition and may be consequently described as modernist. Subsequently, it would be interesting to focus on the effect modernist devices produce on the novel's structure. Finally, it would be noticed that the style itself appears very helpful in the analysis of the construction of both personal and national identity. Just as the story of Smith's characters, in fact, the novel's form can be said to deal with identity issues.

## 3.2 The Realist Mode

### 3.2.1 An Attempt to Define Realism

The term realism was firstly used within an artistic context approximately around the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to indicate realist writers and poetry (Bertoni, 19). It is towards the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, however, that the term slowly consolidates and begins to indicate a precise historical period and poetics (Bertoni, 19-20). As soon as the term becomes stable, however, its meaning starts to ramify, determining the ambivalent nature of the concept (Bertoni, 20). Due to its relativity and ambiguity, no one has ever succeeded in defining realism univocally (Bertoni, 30). Perhaps such a difficulty in conveying a univocal meaning may be ascribed to the ambition of the realist mode to connect two entirely different worlds, i.e. art and reality (Bertoni, 30).

In order to face the ambivalence connected to the term, it may be perhaps helpful to distinguish first two possible ways of understanding realism (Bertoni, 30). Realism can be understood as a specific literary tendency (Bertoni, 30). Consequently, literary history has the task to: focus on its most representative

genre (the novel), determine its chronological development (between 1830 and 1890), outline realist authors (Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, G. Eliot, Verga, Manzoni, etc), define its distinctive features (Bertoni, 31-32). Nevertheless, art has always been prompted to imitate reality, thereby transcending time, space and genre (Bertoni, 30-31). Consequently, it may be claimed that any literary work is partly realist, independently from the literary period in which it has been produced (Lukács, quoted in Bertoni, 35-36).

On the evidence of this, before analysing the realist literary movement which developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it may first be useful to consider the role of imitation throughout the centuries. Therefore, the development of a realist movement can perhaps be better understood if the concept of *mimesis* developed firstly by Plato and later by Aristotle is firstly explained (Bertoni, 39). Plato's and Aristotle's idea of *mimesis*, however, is rather different (Bertoni, 53). Plato perceives *mimesis* negatively: since he associates it with the strategy through which the poet gives voice to his characters, Plato believes *mimesis* is pure illusion (Bertoni, 39-40). The poet thus speaks through his characters' voice, thereby making the reader think it is the character, and not the poet, who is talking (Bertoni, 40-41). Unlike Plato, Aristotle does not judge *mimesis* negatively, but considers it a human faculty which may both entertain and educate (Bertoni, 49). Perhaps more importantly, Aristotle rejects the idea of *mimesis* as a banal reproduction of what exists but rather prefers to consider it as a depiction of what may be and may happen (Bertoni, 50).

Reflecting upon Aristotle's idea of *mimesis*, Paul Ricœur suggests that *mimesis* involves *poiesis*: imitation is thus inseparable from the creative process (Bertoni, 51). Hence, it appears that Aristotle understood, far before realist literary tradition, that there is a gap between artistic reproduction and reality itself (Bertoni, 52). As a consequence, as pointed out by Paul Ricœur, a literary work is never an ordinary replica of reality but rather a fictional reproduction (Bertoni, 55).

When Aristotle's *Poetics* is rediscovered, especially in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of *mimesis* returns to be at the heart of the artistic reflection (Bertoni, 57). However, Aristotle's work is frequently misinterpreted: throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century artists are in fact required to reproduce the world accurately, without allowing art to adjust or improve the reality represented (Bertoni, 57, 61). The artist is consequently divided between the desire to produce an art which pursues perfection and the need to reproduce nature faithfully (Bertoni, 61). Such a predicament could be easily resolved by allowing art not only to reproduce reality, but even to improve it: art's distinctive feature is indeed represented by the faculty to represent nature according to an ideal model of beauty (Bertoni, 61). These two apparently contradicting tendencies appear to be at the basis of the ambiguity of imitation: on the one hand imitation constitutes a faithful reproduction of the world; on the other hand it represents the possibility to mould ideal beauty, producing a work of art (Bertoni, 63).

Such a fracture appears to be at the basis of literary reproductions too (Bertoni, 63). When a literary work aspires to represent reality, it cannot ignore the difference between the medium it uses, i.e. language, and the nature of the objects it represents (Bertoni, 83). Consequently, a literary work cannot represent reality directly, but can only provide a reproduction of the world through signs (Bertoni, 86). It follows that any literary work, even the most realist, is likely to experience the gap between its desire to reproduce reality as it is and the poetic necessity to subvert it from inside, as a consequence of the medium it uses (Bertoni, 112). The dilemmas literary realism is required to cope with can be resolved by considering a literary work as a further world shaped by the artist and not as a strict copy of reality (Abrams, quoted in Bertoni, 101).

When realism begins to develop as a literary movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, it does not manage to conciliate the fracture between art and reality. The main theoretical principle of literary realism consists in fact in

representing objects as they appear in life (Kaminsky, quoted in Lee, 5). However, despite representing reality as objectively as possible, reality inevitably turns into an artefact when portrayed (Lee, 5). Therefore, it appears that art cannot represent reality directly (Lee, 5). The existing reality needs in fact to be modified and adapted to the artistic medium deployed to represent it (Lee, 5). At the close of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Mme de Staël herself believes that realism should free itself from any naïve submission to reality in order to reach maturity and legitimate fiction as a vehicle to represent reality (Bertoni, 143, 148). Hence, it appears that literature is divided between the longing to represent reality as it is and the possibility to adjust and improve it while reproducing it (Bertoni, 148).

Fielding's works may be considered an important contribution in this sense and a turning point within the literary developments of the time (Bertoni, 148). Fielding manages to conciliate the writer's desire to represent reality accurately and the inevitable tension literary imitation involves (Bertoni, 148-149). A further crucial turning point in the European literary tradition is represented by the publication of Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* (Bertoni, 218). Flaubert's novel is destined to change irreversibly the relationship between literature and reality: Flaubert manages to make any fictional aspect resemble reality itself (Bertoni, 218). Furthermore, not only does Flaubert depict the world realistically but even cynically (Bertoni, 218). Perhaps paradoxically, Flaubert's realist observations are determined by a repugnance to reality and everyday life (Bertoni, 221).

It is in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century France, in which Flaubert's novel is published, that the term realism is used for the first time with reference to a poetics, even though the French authors who deploy it do not consider themselves a proper movement (Bertoni, 201). Soon after, realism also develops a scientific basis and starts to be called 'naturalism' (Bertoni, 224). Émile Zola, considered to be the founder of naturalism, focuses on writers who have described nature

rigorously in order to find precursors who can legitimate his aesthetic project (Bertoni, 226). On the basis of his reasoning, Zola even suggests that the relationship between literature and reality is founded on continuity: Zola thus believes language can represent reality accurately, in full, without leaving out any aspect (Bertoni, 232-233).

Despite Zola's attempts, the French writer is criticized even by his own disciples since he is striving to impose a method which is looked with suspicion by many of his contemporaries (Bertoni, 233). The crisis of his method can be ascribed to Zola's belief that literature can reproduce reality on the basis of a relation of continuity between representation and the object represented (Bertoni, 237). Such a belief is characteristic of a movement inclined to approach the relationship between art and reality naïvely, denying the difference between the examination of the outside world and its reproduction in a literary work (Bertoni, 237).

The fracture between art and reality is actually evident in Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*, which stresses the rupture between language and the external world (Bertoni, 240). Unlike other realist authors writing in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Flaubert and other novelists writing in the second half of the century prioritize form over contents (Bertoni, 241). From this moment onwards, writers become increasingly aware of the impossibility to represent reality directly, since its representation is mediated by language (Bertoni, 244). Hence, writers do not seem to believe any longer in the existence of continuity between literary works and reality (Bertoni, 245). Literature can thus only provide a surrogate of reality, since reality is inaccessible (Bertoni, 246). Hence, it appears that a literary work can resemble the world only through a writer's efforts to conceal the fracture between art and reality (Bertoni, 244). In order to conceal this fracture novelists are likely to deploy artistic techniques (Bertoni, 244).

Therefore, it appears that artistic imitation has always been divided between the need to produce an accurate copy of reality and the possibility to manipulate reality through art. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century realist tradition is based on the same conflicting desires: on the one hand realism would like to produce a faithful copy of reality, on the other hand realist novelists become increasingly aware of the aesthetic devices a writer may use to improve his work (Ricoeur, quoted in Bertoni, 260). An accurate reproduction of reality seems thus to be prevented by the artistic devices deployed by a writer to shape a literary work: consequently, art does not seem to be able to resemble reality directly (Bertoni, 261).

Despite Bertoni's accurate analysis, however, it still does not seem to be clear what realism consists of. It appears that the literary movement of realism cannot be easily defined since its development has been influenced by novelists' different awareness of the distance between language and reality (Bertoni, 311): even though the literary movement of realism at first aspires to represent reality as it is (Kaminsky, quoted in Lee, 5), such a premise determined several controversies (Lee, 5). Consequently, realism does not appear to be a univocal movement and scholars may thus encounter difficulties in describing it (Bertoni, 311). Furthermore, even though there are novels which undoubtedly belong to the realist literary tradition, a certain realism cannot be denied to other novels either (Bertoni, 311). Realism should thus be thought as an intermediate space between the two different worlds of language and reality (Bertoni, 313). In order to determine whether a literary work is realist, critics can thus base their analysis on a method which aims to outline the main representative features of this intermediate space rather than attempting to define it exhaustively (Bertoni, 313).

In order to provide a different perspective from which to look at realism and define it, Bertoni recalls Nelson Goodman, from whom the Italian scholar has learnt how to deal with a concept which cannot be defined univocally

(Bertoni, 314). When coping with the concept of art, instead of wondering *what* art is, Goodman decided to determine *when* something can be classified as art, thereby listing a work of art's main features (Goodman, quoted in Bertoni, 314). It is on the basis of Goodman's teaching that Bertoni attempts to define which aspects may be considered typically realist, rather than striving to define realism univocally (Bertoni, 314). Thus, in suggesting such a procedure, Bertoni indicates four levels according to which a text can be analysed (315). Since Bertoni's levels can be useful to determine which aspects within *White Teeth* may be labelled as realist, they will be listed and explained in detail in the successive paragraph.

### 3.2.2 Realist Effects within *White Teeth*

As mentioned above, the levels listed by Bertoni may be helpful in order to detect which elements within *White Teeth* create a realist effect. Therefore, it appears indispensable to enumerate Bertoni's levels. The first level is determined by a text's content: a literary work can be said to be realist whether its contents can be compared with empiric experience (Bertoni, 315). The second level is determined by a text's form: a novel can be defined realist whether it deploys specific techniques through which the author conceals the fracture between art and reality (Bertoni, 315). A further level connects realism to semiotics: reality is represented through signs which constitute a semiotic version of reality. The signs deployed can be decoded in order to see whether they conform to the specific cultural and historical context within which a text is produced (Bertoni, 316, 342). Finally, the fourth level consists in the relationship between the world which has been described in the text and the reader's perception of the text itself (Bertoni, 316).

Needless to say that the four different levels do not necessarily coexist within a realist work; a text may in fact conform only to one of the levels

previously listed and lacks the others (Bertoni, 316). Being the first two levels more relevant to determine which aspects within *White Teeth* may be considered realist, our analysis will consequently focus primarily on Bertoni's first two levels. Let us now consider the two levels in detail, by firstly analysing which contents within *White Teeth* produce a realist effect and secondly which formal devices can be labelled as realist.

According to Bertoni's first level, in a realist work contents are subjected to natural laws (Bertoni, 315). Smith's story appears to be realistic and the world which emerges from the novel seems to be influenced by the same laws human beings can experience personally (see Bertoni, 320). Therefore, the events narrated by Smith can be explained empirically and do not seem to be provoked by transcendental laws or surreal elements (see Bertoni, 320). Nevertheless, there are episodes within the narrative which appear to detach from realism: plot coincidences and repetitions appear to be improbable happenings rather than realistic ones (Squires, 66). For instance, as soon as Magid breaks his nose during a cyclone back in Bangladesh, his twin, Millat, who still lives in Britain, breaks his nose too (Smith, 213, 216). In addition, it may appear improbable that Clara's grandmother, Ambrosia, is taken advantage sexually twice, by two different men, firstly by Charlie Durham and later by Sir Edmund Glenard. Furthermore, the eugenicist Dr Marc-Pierre Perret reappears hundreds of pages after his first appearance, in a completely different context: if at the beginning of the novel his character is connected to Nazism, towards the end of the story he reappears as Marcus Chalfen's mentor (Smith, 119, 532). Moreover, Archie is shot twice, both times in Perret's presence: once Archibald is shot by Perret himself, who thereby attempts not to be killed by Archibald; a second time he is accidentally shot by Millat, who aims to shoot Perret during Marcus's presentation of his FutureMouse project. However Archibald, in order to prevent Millat from wounding Perret, interposes himself between Millat and the target of his shot (Smith, 533). Consequently, not only is Archibald shot twice, he even

saves the same man for a second time. On the basis of these episodes it appears that realistic elements are combined and alternated with less credible happenings; plot coincidences and repetitions, however, are made believable precisely thanks to their insertion within a predominant realist narration (Squires, 66).

A further characteristic outlined by Bertoni in his first level, which can be used to determine the realist effect within a novel, consists in the representation of everyday life (315, 320). *White Teeth* seems to conform to this element since Smith narrates the story of three families, the Joneses, the Iqbals and the Chalfens, and describes their members while performing everyday activities and facing ordinary problems. Smith's characters are thus described while being at work or at school, while meeting in a pub or taking a walk, while arguing with their partner or their offspring, while defending their beliefs or criticizing others' ideals. Smith's characters are thus set in their daily environment and their lives seem to flow as they usually do. Therefore, *White Teeth's* characters are ordinary people whose lives are rather normal.

In representing her characters' daily life, Smith also stresses the class or social condition they embody (Bentley, 497), which, according to Bertoni, is another characteristic of realist narratives (Bertoni, 315). To begin with, the Joneses represent a mixed race family, whose members are Archibald, an Englishman, Clara, his Jamaican wife, and Irie, their mixed race daughter. They are likely to embody a working class family. Since at seventeen Archibald "look[s] just old enough [...] to fool the men from the medical board", he is sent abroad to fight against the Nazis in the Second World War (Smith, 83). Consequently, he does not complete his studies and when returns to England he can offer nothing but his war experience, which however "*isn't really relevant*" (Smith, 14; emphasis in original). Having difficulties in finding a job, he eventually "end[s] up [...] designing the way all kinds of things should be *folded*" (Smith, 15; emphasis in original). Archibald's occupation is thus

described as “a dead-end job” (Smith, 14). Like Archibald, Clara does not seem to be well educated either: she moves to England when she is seventeen and soon after, when she is only nineteen, she marries Archibald (Smith, 26, 31). Clara seems to resume her studies only after Irie’s birth (Smith, 458). In the meanwhile, she appears to have a part-time job “as a supervisor for a Kilburn youth group” (Smith, 73).

As far as the Iqbals are concerned, they represent a Muslim family living in contemporary London. Their family is composed of Samad, Alsana and their twin sons, Magid and Millat. Unlike Archibald, Samad is an educated man: he has in fact studied at Dehli University (Smith, 57). However, when he moves to England and has to earn a living to support his family, he eventually accepts a job as a waiter, albeit frustrating it may be. Samad thus accepts an unpretentious, low-paid job, repressing his ambition. Perhaps paradoxically, despite being Samad an educated person, his family may be said to represent another example of working class unit. As far as Alsana is concerned, like Clara, she has got married very young, and soon after her husband, looking for a fresh start, has brought her to England (Smith, 12). Just as Clara, she does not seem to have a proper occupation, and despite coming “from a respected old Bengali family” (Smith, 62), no reference is made to the level of her education.

Marcus and Joyce Chalfen, on the contrary, are highly educated and are said to be “*intellectuals*” (Smith, 132; emphasis in original): Marcus is a scientist and his wife Joyce is involved with gardening, even though her books seem “more about relationships than flowers” (Smith, 310). Furthermore, they appear to embody a typical middle class English family. Their belief in therapy seems to point out the importance they place on mental health and emotional stability (Smith, 313); unsurprisingly, therefore, they seem to have a logical solution to any problem. However, their attitude towards life is frequently ironized within the novel and Millat himself, when offered a cup of tea to calm him down, rudely replies: “[f]or fuckssake! I don’t want any *fuckin*g tea. All you

ever do is drink tea! You lot must piss pure bloody tea” (Smith, 333; emphasis in original).

Additionally, the characters Smith represents live in contemporary London. London can be recognized geographically, as will be highlighted in a later paragraph, for the references to Willesden Green, a neighbourhood situated in north-west London, and Whitechapel, situated in east London (Smith, 46, 55, 59). London can be recognized not only geographically, for the areas Smith refers to, but also socially, for the issues an increasingly multicultural city is characterized by and required to deal with. Whitechapel, for instance, is described as a dangerous area, “where one couldn’t bring up children” because of “its NF gangs” (Smith, 59). Furthermore, after Enoch Powell gave his notorious speech, the Iqbals, who used to live in Whitechapel, were forced to stay in their “basement while kids broke the windows with their steel-capped boots” (Smith, 62). Problems such as intolerance, racism and violent acts appear thus to mirror the changes which have taken place in London throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s, which are the decades Smith’s novel focuses on (Head, 106). A writer’s interest in contemporary life is pointed out by Bertoni as a further feature of a realist literary work (Bertoni, 315). Therefore, Smith’s concern with 20<sup>th</sup>-century London seems to be a further realist effect within *White Teeth*.

Bertoni also believes that a realist novel requires the insertion of history within its plot (Bertoni, 315): the importance of history has also been highlighted by the American writer DeLillo, who suggests that the narration of episodes belonging to everyday life acquires meaning only if connected to history (DeLillo, quoted in Bertoni, 323). It is as if ordinary people’s life becomes tangible only if looked from a historical perspective (Bertoni, 323). Smith’s novel appears to conform to this element since her characters’ respective stories continuously interweave history. Not surprisingly, therefore, each section, apart from the last one, contains an entire chapter devoted to the

connection of a character to history: each chapter thus refers to the “root canals” of a precise character. The chapter entitled “The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal” refers to the Second World War, during which Archibald and Samad have encountered for the first time (Smith, 83). Their friendship is thus rooted in the war. In chapter ten, “The Root Canals of Mangal Pande”, the 1857 Indian Mutiny is recalled from the perspective of Samad, who, unlike Britain, considers Mangal Pande, his great-grandfather and first mutineer, a hero (Smith, 244). The chapter entitled “The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden” refers to the connection between colonial history and the Bowden family: Hortense’s mother, Ambrosia, is impregnated by Charlie Durham, an English colonist living and working in Jamaica, which at the time belonged to the British Empire (Smith, 356). In addition to these chapters which are entirely devoted to historical happenings, Smith inserts many other historical references throughout her novel: for instance, she recalls the 1907 Kingston earthquake (361), Enoch Powell’s speech (72), the hurricane which hit England in 1987 (220), the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi (197), the Fall of the Berlin Wall (237), the burn of a “dirty book”, which, despite not being explicitly mentioned, is likely to be Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* (230, 233; Squires, 32). All the historical events referred to within the novel are obviously fictionalized; nevertheless, they contribute to rendering the narrative more realistic (see Bertoni, 323).

Having analysed Smith’s novel according to Bertoni’s first level, which focuses on the contents of a literary work, it is now possible to move on to consider *White Teeth* according to Bertoni’s second level, which prioritizes form. To begin with, as suggested by Bertoni, a realist novel is likely to be characterized by impersonality (Bertoni, 331): realist novelists believed the novel had to be “an unmanipulated, natural chain of events” (Lee, 11). Impersonality seems to be present in Smith’s novel, which is narrated from a third person omniscient narrator who usually tends to conceal his voice

(Paproth, 14). The concealment of the narrative voice can be achieved in many different ways, one of which is free indirect speech (Childs, quoted in Tew, 49), whose extensive use amongst modernists has turned it into a typically modernist feature, as will be stressed in a subsequent paragraph (Stevenson, 37). Smith's use of free indirect speech highlights how realist elements, such as omniscient narration and impersonality, are combined with a distinctive modernist practice. Such a combination is not surprising: as pointed out by Genette, techniques such as the free indirect discourse and interior monologue can increase the reader's involvement with a literary work, thereby reducing the reader's perception of the narrative voice's intrusion (Genette quoted in Bertoni, 336). In Smith's novel the narrator's intrusion is thus concealed by making the reader believe that he is reading the characters' own interior thoughts rather than the narrator's commentary (Squires, 61).

A further formal characteristic, which tends to conceal the narrative voice and is considered distinctively realist, consists in the use of dialogues, which tend to show rather than tell the developments within a novel (Bertoni, 332). It appears that the frequent use of direct speech within *White Teeth* "tends to show us, rather than tell us events" (Bentley, 497).

Additionally, the concealment of the narrative voice seems to be achieved also by reproducing characters' specific way of speaking. Smith's narrative reproduces the manner of speaking of Hortense and Clara and of minor characters such as Donzel and Clarence: coming all from Jamaica, they are likely to express themselves by using patois, which is transcribed directly on the page. Smith also appears to transcribe on the page the sectorial language deployed by the Chalfens when approaching reality: being Joyce a gardener and Marcus a scientist, their way of speaking tends to reflect their scientific formation. *White Teeth* thus seems to conform to linguistic mimesis, which is another formal element stressed by Bertoni (315).

However, Smith's narrator does not seem to be always willing to conceal his voice. In fact, he sometimes intrusively intervenes in the story, by addressing or involving the reader openly (Squires, 61). There are many episodes within the novel in which the narrator uses pronouns such as 'we' and 'you' (Squires, 61). When observing Glenard Oak's playground, for instance, the narrator comments on what he sees by saying:

This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experience. It is only this late in the day that *you* can walk into the playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune. [...] It is only this late in the day, and possibly only in Willesden, that *you* can find best friends Sita and Sharon [...]. Yet, despite all the mixing up, despite the fact that *we* have finally slipped into each other's lives with reasonable comfort [...] it is still hard to admit that there is no one more English than the Indian, no one more Indian than the English (Smith, 326-327; my emphasis).

When later commenting on Irie's sufferings and delusions for unrequited love, the narrator repeatedly uses the pronouns 'we', 'us', 'ourselves' and the adjective 'our':

What made *us* think that anyone who fails to love *us* is damaged, lacking, malfunctioning in some way? And particularly, if they replace *us* with a god or a weeping madonna, or the face of Christ in a ciabatta roll – then *we* call them crazy. Deluded. Regressive. *We* are so convinced of the goodness of *ourselves*, and the goodness of *our* love, *we* cannot bear to believe that there might be something more worthy of love than *us*, more worthy of worship (Smith, 462; my emphasis).

Few pages after, when considering the unsuccessful encounter between Magid and Millat, the narrative voice intervenes once more involving the reader:

Because *we* often imagine that immigrants are constantly on the move, footloose, able to change course at any moment, able to employ their legendary resourcefulness at every turn. *We* have been told of the resourcefulness of Mr Schmutter, or the footloosity of Mr Banajii, who sail into Ellis Island or Dover or Calais and step into their foreign lands [...] free of any kind of baggage [...] (Smith, 465; my emphasis).

The narrator intervenes including the reader within the narrative also when judging Millat's state when reaching the Perret Institute: "Yes, Millat was stoned. And it may be absurd to *us* that one Iqbal can believe that breadcrumbs laid down by another Iqbal, generations before him, hat not yet blown away in the breeze. But it really doesn't matter what *we* believe" (Smith, 506; my emphasis).

In addition to these episodes in which the narrative voice intentionally uses pronouns such as 'we' and 'you' to include the reader, there are other parts in which the narrator reveals his presence to the reader, without concealing it. For instance, when Archibald meets Clara for the first time, before presenting the reader with the conversation they have, the narrator intervenes saying: "But first a description" (Smith, 23). Therefore, the narrator appears to interrupt the natural course of the narration, thereby revealing his presence, in order to provide first a description of Clara. Similarly, when introducing Clara's past, since she "was from *somewhere*. She had *roots*", the narrator makes his voice perceptible by suggesting that "it's about time people told the truth about beautiful women" (Smith, 27; emphasis in original).

Therefore, on the evidence of all the episodes in which Smith's narrator intervenes within the narrative, it appears that an unobtrusive omniscient narrator is combined and alternated with an obtrusive omniscient narrator.

Despite not being extremely obtrusive, this property of *White Teeth*'s narrative voice seems to suggest that the principle of impersonality indicated by Bertoni as a characteristic feature of realism is not always respected within Smith's novel (see Bertoni, 332).

It is likely that a narrator who sometimes intervenes addressing or involving the reader within a text may also provide his point of view. In Smith's novel, the point of view from which episodes are usually narrated tends to be internal and variable: hence, focalization is not restricted to one single character; on the contrary, Smith's narrator appears to adopt several different points of view throughout the novel, depending on whose experiences the narrative voice is describing (Squires, 61). Nonetheless, there are episodes which are narrated from a non-focalized perspective. The episodes previously cited, in which the narrator openly addresses or includes the reader, are parts in which happenings tend to be observed from the narrator's perspective. Therefore, a variable internal focalization seems to be combined and alternated with a zero focalization. Consequently, Bertoni's principle, according to which a realist work is narrated from a subjective perspective, does not always appear to be respected within *White Teeth* (Bertoni, 315).

According to Bertoni, other two aspects, which can determine whether a literary work is realist, are space and time: by quoting Watt, Bertoni suggests that realism introduced a changed representation of space and time (336). In realist works, both space and time tend to be described concretely, thereby locating characters in a precise spatial and temporal dimension (Watt, quoted in Bertoni, 336). As far as *White Teeth* is concerned, Smith's characters are situated in a geographically recognizable space (Bentley, 497; Tew, 51). London can be recognized geographically for the references to Willesden Green, a neighbourhood situated in north-west London, where Smith's characters live (Smith, 46, 55). Willesden is described as "a nice area", especially if compared with Whitechapel, a neighbourhood in east London, from which Samad's family

has moved out (Smith, 59, 62). Time too appears significant within the novel: each chapter, in fact, in addition to being named after a character, includes two years upon which the narrative is focused. Hence, the temporal dimension is marked precisely and the reader knows exactly when the happenings take place.

Nevertheless, time does not follow its linear flow; paradoxically, the present precedes rather than follow the past, thereby depriving the latter of a cause-effect logic (Sell, 29). Moreover, as pointed out in a further paragraph, the narrative of *White Teeth* is extremely fragmented, thus requiring the reader to move back and forth in order to reconstruct the novel's chronological order. It may be useless to say that, when writing a novel, a novelist tends to manipulate time; consequently, being a novel a work of art, story and plot hardly ever coincide (Frank 1978, 283). Nonetheless, even though story and plot cannot entirely correspond, realist literary works tend to favour a temporality which progresses linearly from past to present (Frank 1978, 284). Since Smith's novel prefers a non-linear, fragmented narration, it appears to distance itself from realism. As will be highlighted in detail in a further paragraph, Smith's choice can be ascribed to modernism (see Stevenson, 92).

In conclusion, on the basis of this analysis, it may be claimed that *White Teeth* can only be partly labelled as a realist work. Even though Smith's novel conforms to some of the realist elements listed by Bertoni in his first two levels (see Bertoni, 315), it does not appear to adapt to all of them. Actually, there are aspects within *White Teeth* which seem to mirror the use of 20<sup>th</sup>-century devices, thereby challenging distinctive realist techniques. Consequently, it may be worthwhile to consider 20<sup>th</sup>-century techniques in detail.

### 3.3 The Modernist Mode

As noticed in the previous paragraph, it appears that Smith's novel does not only contain realist elements. On the contrary, it appears that realist devices have been combined with more innovative devices, which may be labelled as modernist. It may thus be claimed that distinctively realist features seem to be destabilized by the concomitant deployment of typically modernist features (Tew, 49; Paproth, 10).

When analysing *White Teeth*, it is necessary not to forget that Smith's novel was written in 2000 and consequently mirrors the postmodern world in which it takes place. Smith's characters unsuccessful pursuit of a stable and fixed identity thus reflects a postmodern world which is increasingly uncertain and unpredictable (Paproth, 9). Consequently, in order to reproduce such a volatile world, the "structurally sound and clearly marked" narrative is subverted from inside (Paproth, 20). Although the reader may attempt to understand the novel's meaning by relying on its well-defined external structure, he needs to face an extremely fragmented narrative, constructed on "a web of parallels and correspondences", which mirrors the chaotic relationships between characters, temporal dimensions and thematic issues (Paproth, 20, 27). As a result, the 'certainties' the reader is provided with through traditional stylistic devices are soon obliterated through the use of more innovative devices. Therefore, it appears that not only does Smith criticize human beings' rejection of ambivalence and tendency towards certain and defined identities through her subject matter, but through her form and stylistic devices too.

It may thus be worthwhile to consider which modernist devices deployed by Smith seem to challenge traditional stylistic features. On the basis of such an analysis it appears that free indirect speech, the openness of the novel's ending and the rejection of linearity are the main modernist devices used by the author

in writing *White Teeth* (see Stevenson, 34, 158, 91). These three modernist features will thus be analysed in detail in the following paragraphs.

### 3.3.1 Free Indirect Speech

One of the distinctive features of modernism, which has been used by Smith, consists in the deployment of free indirect style, deployed “to represent inner thought and deeper movements of the psyche” (Stevenson, 34). Unlike free indirect discourse, which is used to describe thoughts which have been expressed verbally, free indirect style reflects characters’ inner thoughts which are never pronounced aloud (Stevenson, 35). To be precise, the deployment of free indirect style is not entirely new; actually, it seems that it has always constituted a characteristic element of fiction (Stevenson, 36). However, what distinguishes modernist authors from previous novelists is an extensive and frequent use of such a technique (Stevenson, 37). It would thus be interesting to know which transformations brought to an increased and intensive deployment of free indirect style, since Smith herself appears to reproduce her characters’ inner thoughts by deploying this technique.

It appears that the deployment of free indirect style, which later brought to the development of techniques such as stream of consciousness and interior monologue, can be ascribed to the modernists’ concern with unspoken inner thoughts (Stevenson, 16). By paraphrasing Virginia Woolf, it appears that modernist novelists are more interested in representing the world within characters rather than observing the one outside them (Stevenson, 16). Hence, modernist writing can be said to be characterized by a movement from an objective to a subjective description of reality: modernists seem more interested in describing how the world is perceived rather than how it is (Stevenson, 64). Like modernists, Smith herself appears to be concerned with her characters’

unspoken thoughts, despite simultaneously accounting for the external world too (see Stevenson, 64).

Such an apprehension with the inner world can be explained by referring to the yielding of previous certainties (Stevenson, 71). If modernity was characterized by a pursuit of order and tendency to rationality (Bauman, 1993, 168; Bauman 1991a, 283), the social condition of postmodernity, introduced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, conversely consists in the consciousness of an ambivalent and structureless world (Bauman 1992, 198). The early 20<sup>th</sup> century thus lacks the “stability and certainty” the Victorian world was based upon and is thus “riddled with disbelief” (Carruthers, quoted in Stevenson, 72). Hence, lacking the beliefs and certainties previous novelists had benefited from, 20<sup>th</sup>-century novelists cannot rely any longer on an orderly and stable perception of the world (Stevenson, 72, 74). Consequently, since the world has been deprived of its stable meaning and reassuring order, modernist authors believe that human beings’ inner world may be the only space from which to look at the external world (Stevenson, 76). Therefore, the effort to portray characters’ inner world has become a distinctive feature of modernism (Stevenson, 16).

Like modernist authors, Smith appears to be interested in mirroring her characters’ inner world (see Stevenson, 64). Hence, in order to do so, Smith deploys free indirect style to express her characters’ unspoken thoughts and feelings (Tew, 49). The narrator’s voice thus merges with the characters’ voice, rendering the two almost undistinguishable (see Stevenson, 35). For instance, when revealing Clara’s reflections on Archibald, the narrative voice firstly suggests that “Clara understood that Archibald Jones was no romantic hero” and recalls her thoughts through a third person narration (Smith, 48). Soon after, however, reflections which are recognizably Clara’s are transcribed without being mediated through the narrative voice: “[n]o white knight, then, this Archibald Jones. No aims, no hopes, no ambitions. A man whose greatest pleasures were English breakfast and DIY. A dull man. An old man. And yet. .

.good. He was a *good* man. And *good* might not amount to much, *good* might not light up a life, but it is something” (Smith, 48; emphasis in original). Another example of free indirect style may be noticed in Hortense’s apprehension for the imminent end of the world. The narrative voice firstly suggests that “Hortense was convinced these were the sign of signs. These were the final days” and later seems to leave Hortense’s voice speaks for its own:

There were eight months to the end of the world. Hardly enough time! There were banners to be made, articles to be written (‘Will the Lord Forgive the Onanist?’), doorsteps to be trod, bells to be rung. There was Darcus to think about – who could not walk to the fridge without assistance - how was he to make it to the kingdom of the Lord? And in all Clara must lend a hand; there was no time for boys, for Ryan Topps, for skulking around, for adolescent angst (Smith, 33).

A further example of free indirect style can be noticed in Irie’s first encounter with the Chalfens. Irie is positively surprised by Marcus Chalfen, consequently the narrative voice reveals to the reader “[s]he felt her cheeks flush with the warm heat of Chalfenist revelation” (Smith, 326). Immediately after, her thoughts are transcribed directly, without being mediated through the voice of the narrator: “so there existed fathers who dealt in the present, who didn’t drag ancient history around like a chain and ball. So there were men who were not neck-high and sinking in the quagmire of the past” (Smith, 326).

Perhaps Smith does not use free indirect style as extensively as modernist authors do. Nevertheless, even when not deploying a free indirect style, Smith’s novel tends to give prominence to the characters’ inner conflicts. Hence, despite not transcribing their unspoken thoughts and desires directly, the narrative voice still tends to focus on the characters’ interiority. As already pointed out in the second chapter, in fact, many of Smith’s characters tend to struggle within themselves when confronted with opposing values and beliefs. Samad’s interior struggle to make his Islamic faith prevail over the corruption of the West is as

evident as Irie's efforts to cancel her Jamaican features in order to allow her English traits to triumph. A further yet opposite interior conflict afflicts Samad and Irie: the former, believing the past determines the present, spends his life coming to terms with his past, thereby incapable to live in the present; the latter hopelessly tries to delete the past by clinging to the present, eventually realizing that the past cannot be escaped. Just as Clara is divided between her previous faith and her present atheism, Millat finds it difficult to renounce his Western tastes once he has embraced Islamism. Similarly, once Joshua becomes truly conscious of his choice, he appears to be split between his decision to reject Chalfenism and the fear of its consequences. Therefore, whether deploying free indirect style or allowing the characters' thoughts to be mediated through and narrated by a third person narrator, Smith's novel tends to share the modernist tendency to "illuminate the mind within rather than the world without" (Woolf, quoted in Stevenson, 16).

### 3.3.2 Ending

The historical, political and cultural context in which modernism develops does not only prompt artists to focus on the inner world rather than on the external world; it also pushes them to challenge a further element which is typical of 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels, i.e. a definitive, clear ending (Stevenson, 146, 158). In fact, despite portraying dilemmas which may affect either private or public life, 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels appear to guarantee that these predicaments are destined to be overcome and eventually resolved – if not happily, at least coherently (Stevenson, 146). Thus, Victorian novels tend to end "too simply and too neatly", usually "in marriage or in death" (Matz, 215).

Unlike Victorian novels, many of the novels written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century "[end] in openness and uncertainty" (Stevenson, 158). If 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels seek a stable ending which "brings the story firmly to a close", the 20<sup>th</sup> century

opens a new phase of uncertainty and novelists can no longer rely on definite conclusions (Stevenson, 158). The openness of novels' endings appears thus to reflect a changed approach to "the process and goals of experience in life" (Friedman, 15): if in 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels "experience is closed", thereby not permitting further developments, in 20<sup>th</sup>-century novels, conversely, experience is continuously expanded (Friedman, 17, 29). As a consequence, if once the happenings which had been developed within a novel used to be brought to a close in the novel's ending (Friedman, 180), in the 20<sup>th</sup> century experience is perceived as open, consequently requiring an unclosed ending (Friedman, 15,180). It appears that novels which are destined to remain unclosed are characterized by "an endlessly expanding process"; therefore, even though characters strive to resolve their own problems, the issues they deal with ultimately reveal to be unsolvable (Friedman, 182).

Smith herself appears to be unwilling to supply her reader with a definitive ending. Actually, her novel's conclusion, like many modernists' ending, can be said to be open since her characters' dilemmas are left unresolved (see Stevenson, 158). In the very last pages of *White Teeth* the narrator seems even to mock the reader's expectation for a happy ending. "Young professional women aged eighteen to thirty-two" (Smith, 541) are perhaps likely to expect

a snapshot seven years hence of Irie, Joshua and Hortense sitting by a Caribbean sea (for Irie and Joshua become lovers in the end; you can only avoid your fate for so long), while Irie's fatherless little girl writes affectionate postcards to *Bad Uncle Millat* and *Good Uncle Magid* and feels free as Pinocchio, a puppet clipped of paternal strings (Smith, 541).

Perhaps the reader would also be delighted to know that O'Connell's has "finally opened [its] doors to women" and Clara and Alsana are in there playing a game with Archibald and Samad (Smith, 541). However, providing the reader with this kind of stories would mean "[spreading] the myth, the wicked lie, that

the past is always tense and the future, perfect” (Smith, 541). Archibald yet “knows, it’s not like that. It’s never been like that” (Smith, 541). As a consequence, the novel ends by focusing on present happenings, leaving her characters’ future trajectories undisclosed. The closing snapshot the reader is provided with is that of a bleeding man watching a mouse and wishing it a free existence (Smith, 541-542).

In conclusion, it appears that, if the existence of Smith’s characters is unstable, the ending of the novel itself cannot guarantee a stability a postmodern world does not seem to possess (see Bauman 1991b, 173). Despite the characters’ efforts to overcome their internal conflicts, existence proves to be inconsistent and the dilemmas they are affected by reveal to be unsolvable, as in many modernist novels (see Friedman, 182). The openness of modernists’ and Smith’s ending can thus be connected to the increasingly lack of certainties the postmodern condition is characterized by (see Stevenson, 158).

### 3.3.3 The Rejection of Linearity

Alongside with fostering interest in characters’ inner world and depriving novels of a clear conclusion, 20<sup>th</sup>-century increasing uncertainties also influence the structure of novels, as a consequence of a changed attitude towards time (Stevenson, 86). The climate in which modernists live determines in fact their increasing concern with time (Stevenson, 88). Such a concern brings to the development of a new perception upon time, which is particularly evident in modernist writings’ structure (Stevenson, 90). Hence, it is not a coincidence that modernist novels share a common rejection of a conventional chronological sequence (Stevenson, 91). Novels thus abandon the realist convention of narrating life “as a series of events and consequences” (Stevenson, 91). It may perhaps appear obvious, but it is worth remembering that a novelist always tends to manipulate time; consequently, since story and plot hardly ever coincide, a

chronological sequence is rarely respected (Frank 1978, 283). On the basis of this, it may be claimed that the lack of linear narrative order is not entirely new (Stevenson, 92). Nevertheless, as for modernists' extensive use of free indirect style, the lack of a chronological sequence can be said to be innovative for the extent of its use (Stevenson, 92).

Smith's novel seems to fully distance itself from realism as far as its structure is concerned, in fact, as previously mentioned, events are not narrated as they occur, following a conventional chronological sequence. In *White Teeth*, however, the rejection of a linear chronological order does not appear to be the result of characters' preoccupation with the passage of time, as it is in modernists' novels (see Stevenson, 90). It seems rather to stem from their problematic relationship between past and present. The two temporal dimensions are experienced differently by the various characters, who either try to cling to past values, beliefs, happenings or reject them to embrace present convictions. However, neither past nor present can be entirely rejected (see Paproth, 17); consequently, they tend to reappear in characters' lives. Smith's characters' anxieties towards the relationship between past and present are likely to be responsible for the novel's lack of linearity.

The linearity of a novel can be disrupted by narrating the events not as they happened, but according to the succession in which they are recollected (Stevenson, 92). Memory is thus one of the main elements used to subvert the chronological order of events: memory in fact permits the concomitance of past and present within the mind of characters (Stevenson, 96). Therefore, since modernists tend to focus on characters' inner thoughts, memory appears to be the ideal vehicle to disrupt a linear chronological order by uniting past and present within the mind (Stevenson, 96). Therefore, memory, thanks to the casualness of recollection, turns into a crucial device, capable of distancing itself from conventional temporality (Stevenson, 96). Past happenings can be recalled either through the narrative voice or through characters: hence, both the narrator

and the character can depart from the present (Stevenson, 101). Further, when it is a character who departs from the present, he can either recall past events by voluntarily recounting them or by relying, intentionally or unintentionally, on his inner thoughts (Stevenson, 101).

Modernist authors tend to favour characters' free associations between past and present experience thanks to techniques such as stream of consciousness and interior monologue: therefore, their characters tend to recall events inwardly, without the mediation of a narrator (Stevenson, 101, 105). Zadie Smith, conversely, deploys neither stream of consciousness nor interior monologue in her novel, but limits herself to the use of free indirect style which is alternated to a third person narration (Childs, quoted in Tew, 49). Nevertheless, even though third person narrators are usually supposed to recount happenings in a conventional chronological order (Stevenson, 92), Smith's novel is hardly ever organized as events actually occurred. Further, being *White Teeth's* narrator omniscient, it is evident that he is in the position to supply further details whenever he wants, thereby interrupting the narrative flow and moving back and forth. Therefore, alongside with characters, *White Teeth's* narrator tends to distance itself from the present, thereby disrupting the chronological sequence of the narrative.

When at the beginning of Smith's novel Archibald Jones attempts suicide, for instance, the narrator explains to the reader that "Archie Jones attempted suicide because of his wife Ophelia, a violet-eyed Italian with a faint moustache, had recently divorced him" (Smith, 8). Thus, the narrator departs from the present in order to provide the reader with information concerning Archibald's past and to explain his decision to commit suicide. After recounting Archibald's unlucky marriage, the narrator provides the reader with other very useful details: Archibald's "impotent indecision" and tendency to make choices by flipping a coin (Smith, 11), his friendship with Samad Miah and their shared experience during the war (Smith, 12), O'Connell's as the place where they usually

encounter each other (Smith, 12). It is only after a few pages that the narrator resumes narrating events in the present. Soon after, however, it is Archibald himself who shifts from present to past, experiencing “the obligatory flashback of his life to date” (Smith, 13). He thus recalls “[a] dull childhood, a bad marriage, a dead-end job”, his involvement in the war, his brief career as a “track cyclist” and his friendship with a Swedish cyclist (Smith, 14-15).

This initial episode may be significant in order to understand Smith’s subversion of chronological sequence: in *White Teeth*, the departure from the present may either be the result of the narrator’s decisions or of characters’ inner thoughts and memories. It is however true that Smith is more conventional than authors such as Virginia Woolf or James Joyce, whose extensive use, respectively of interior monologue and stream of consciousness, allows their characters to associate past and present events freely (Stevenson, 103-105). In Smith’s novel, on the contrary, the majority of temporal shifts appear to be mediated through the narrator rather than being determined directly by characters’ associations. Just as the narrator interrupts the ordinary passage of time in order to explain to the reader Archibald’s reasons for committing suicide, it is again the narrator who disrupts the chronological sequence when explaining the headmaster of Glenard Oak’s decision to punish Millat and Irie by sending them to the Chalfens (Smith, 303). The narrator thus recalls the story of the founder of the school, Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard, and the philosophy at the base of his project, which appears to be shared by the headmaster of the school, whose choice “is very much in the history, the spirit, the whole *ethos* of Glenard Oak, ever since Sir Glenard himself” (Smith, 303). Similarly, when Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret unexpectedly reappears at the end of the novel, it is the narrator who recounts what happened between Archibald and the geneticist, thereby explaining why the latter is still alive (Smith, 533-540). Furthermore, even when characters recall past happenings, they do not necessarily associate events according to mental processes, but sometimes also tend to narrate them.

If Archibald recalls his past life through flashbacks and reconstructs it mentally when attempting suicide, other past episodes, such as the Indian Mutiny, are recalled because of characters talking about it rather than due to mental connections. Moreover, soon after, it is the narrator who undertakes the task to recall Samad's memory of the mutiny. Therefore, it appears that *White Teeth's* narrative voice is responsible for several of the temporal shifts within the novel.

Whether past memories are recalled through the voice of the narrator or through a character, and whether a character recalls the past through mental processes or by recounting it, elements such as present happenings, conversations and situations act as stimuli for temporal shifts, as pointed out by Bergson (Bergson, quoted in Stevenson, 108). These stimuli thus permit to move back and forth temporally, thereby disclosing past and present events simultaneously. As already mentioned, unlike modernist writings such as Virginia Woolf's and James Joyce's, the recollection of memories in *White Teeth* depends on a third person narration, therefore past events and mental connections are likely to be filtered through a third person narrator (see Stevenson, 101, 105). As a consequence, associations do not seem to flow as freely as they tend to do in modernists' novels (see Stevenson, 101, 105).

Modernists' changed perception upon time, which brought to a different structure of their narratives, may be understood by recalling Bergson's conception of time (Lewis, quoted in Stevenson, 106). Wyndham Lewis has the merit to have pointed out the correspondences between modernists' and Bergson's perception of time: both perceptions appear to be characterized by the rejection of a chronological development of events (Stevenson, 107). Bergson's conviction can be ascribed to his belief in the fluidity of time: time is thus perceived as a flow (Stevenson, 132). However, Bergson fears that erudition may prevent human beings from experiencing the continuity of time (Bergson, quoted in Stevenson, 132), since it tends to organize time according to "conveniently graspable units" (Stevenson, 132).

Zadie Smith herself tends to divide her novel into clear units which appear to diminish the perception of time as a flow (see Stevenson, 132). It may be sufficient to consider the novel's external structure, which is organized into four sections, each of which contains two significant years, one more recent and one more remote. However, alongside with being marked and divided very clearly, past and present are even juxtaposed to one another. The juxtaposition between the two temporal dimensions, along with reducing the chronological sequence within a novel, provokes the fragmentation of the narrative (Frank 1945b, 653). Perhaps paradoxically, it is precisely the narrative's fragmentation which appears to constitute time as a stream: time is thus considered "a continuum in which distinctions between past and present are obliterated" (Frank 1945b, 653). Therefore, even though the clearly marked external structure may seem to diminish the perception of time as a flow, the fragmentation of the narrative, resulting from the juxtaposition of past to present, is precisely what subverts the novel's division into units from inside (see Frank, 1945b, 653). Despite the apparent strict division between characters' stories, past and present happenings and thematic issues, these elements continuously interweave, thereby creating a temporal continuum (Paproth, 27).

Even though the simultaneity of division and continuity may seem contradictory, it appears that many modernist writings are characterized by fragmentation on the one hand and fluidity on the other hand (Stevenson, 141). It thus appears that from the beginning of the 20th century onwards, narrative has only two possibilities left: it can either portray an unordered world and contemporary life's fragmentation, or attempt to diminish temporal discontinuity through a stream-like narrative (Stevenson, 157). Smith appears to reproduce the uncertainties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by fragmenting her narrative; however, perhaps unexpectedly, such fragmentation appears simultaneously to create a temporal continuum.

### 3.4 *White Teeth*: a Spatialized Novel

#### 3.4.1 The Disruption of Chronological Sequence Explained through Joseph Frank's Theory of Spatial Form<sup>7</sup>

The subversion of chronological sequence analysed in the previous paragraph appears to be one of the most interesting modernist elements deployed by Zadie Smith, since it ultimately affects the novel's overall structure. It would thus be worthwhile to focus on this aspect more in detail. The novel's lack of chronological order and successive fragmented narrative may be ascribed to a process of spatialization which seems to have affected 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature and which may be explained by referring to Joseph Frank's theory of spatial form. In order to understand such a process, it is firstly necessary to notice that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century the difference between visual and verbal arts has blurred (Stevanato, 10). Consequently, despite its inherent temporal dimension, literature has become increasingly spatialized (Frank 1945a, 235). Since it is by disrupting the linearity of events that a novel can amplify its spatial dimension, the subversion of chronological sequence may thus not surprise (Frank 1945a, 232). Therefore, the lack of linearity within a novel can be considered a consequence of this process of spatialization: modernists' changed perception upon time not only brings them to disrupt time, they are even prompted, despite unconsciously, towards a spatialized dimension (Stevenson, 90; Frank 1945a, 235). *White Teeth*, lacking linearity and being fragmented, can thus be suggested to be part of those novels which have undergone a process of spatialization.

In order to understand Frank's theory and apply it to Smith's novel, it may be essential first to consider the relationship between verbal and visual arts.

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<sup>7</sup> Frank's interest in the disruption and following reconstruction of literary works can be related to Gestalt theory which developed in Germany in the 1920s and studies the way in which units are assembled to form groups or single entities (Wong, 863).

Owing to the immediacy of visual arts, it appears that the relationship between the two arts has frequently been typified by mimetic rivalry (Stevanato, 1). In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, the philosopher Lessing suggested that such a rivalry is unwarranted, arguing that apart from their common aim to imitate reality the two codes are utterly different (Stevanato, 2). Lessing states that visual art is spatial, whereas verbal art is temporal since the former deploys images, the latter deploys words (Lessing, quoted in Stevanato, 3). Hence, it seems that the two artistic codes deploy completely different systems of signification (Lessing, quoted in Stevanato, 3). As a consequence of the different means of expression used, it is likely that visual arts convey meanings simultaneously, whereas verbal arts only convey meanings consecutively (Lessing, quoted in Stevanato, 3). On the basis of these differences, it may be suggested that the otherness of each artistic code may perhaps be irreducible: images can be said to be the “unspeakable other” of language, whereas language can be defined as the “invisible other” of images (Gilman, quoted in Stevanato, 5-6).

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Lessing’s and other scholars’ attempts to define visual and verbal arts’ features did not raise much interest (Frank 1945a, 221). It is modernism, which pushes critics to revisit the relationship between the two artistic codes (Stevanato, 9; Frank 1945a, 221). As a result of the crisis which began to affect conventional belief systems, in fact, the modern age transformed the two arts’ relationship, favouring a mutual interchange (Stevanato, 9). Consequently, the differences between visual and verbal arts, respectively defined as temporal and spatial, blur (Stevanato, 10). In brief, as a consequence of modernism, the gap between visual and verbal arts progressively diminishes and the arts begin to seek a mutual interchange, perhaps influencing one another: hence, the otherness of each art is perhaps not as irreducible as previously supposed (Stevanato, 11).

The relationship between visual and verbal arts was revised in 1945 by Joseph Frank, who aimed to use the distinction between the two arts in order to demonstrate and explain the spatialization of form in 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature (Frank 1945a, 225). As previously mentioned, his study may be interesting for the analysis of Smith's novel *White Teeth*, which appears to have undergone a similar process of spatialization.

Frank deploys Lessing's definition of the visual and verbal arts' features as a starting point to analyse the transformations occurred in modern literature (Frank 1945a, 225). By observing the two arts, Lessing suggested that their relation to perception is determined by space and time (Frank 1945a, 225). Lessing believed visual art needs to be spatial, since images can best convey meaning if shown simultaneously; verbal art, conversely, is necessarily temporal, since language is constituted of words which require time to be read (Frank 1945a, 223). Being temporal, verbal art should also be organized according to a linear narrative structure in order to best convey its message (Lessing, quoted in Frank 1945a, 223).

Lessing's stress on the temporal properties and linear sequence of verbal art pushed Frank to consider and analyse modern literature's transformations which have actually defied Lessing's rigid distinction between verbal and visual arts (Frank 1978, 282-283). According to Frank's observations, modern literature does not adapt its contents to the limitations imposed by its medium, i.e. language (1978, 282). Conversely, modern literature appears to be challenging Lessing's norms, moving towards a process of spatialization (Frank 1978, 282; Frank 1945a, 225).

Joseph Frank noticed that modern poetry tends to develop a form which contradicts Lessing's theory (1945a, 226-227). The newness of poems such as E. Pound's and T. S. Eliot's lies in the necessity to perceive the words' meaning simultaneously: hence, even though words come in succession, their meaning cannot be deduced on the basis of a temporal relation, but rather by considering

word-groups as a unity in space (Frank 1945a, 229). Therefore, the complexity of these works lies in the internal tension between the traditional temporal dimension of verbal art and the innovative spatial dimension implied in modern poetry (Frank 1945a, 229): thus it seems that the modern conception of poetry increasingly depends upon a spatial dimension which was traditionally attributed to visual art (Frank 1945a, 229).

The transformations which have affected modern poetry can be noticed also in modern novels (Frank 1945a, 230). In order to prove this, Frank decided to use Flaubert's *Madam Bovary* as the starting point for his analysis and focused on a scene within the novel in which action develops at the same time on three different levels (1945a, 230). Flaubert's comment on this scene was that "everything should sound simultaneously" (Frank 1945a, 231). On the evidence of this scene, it seems that in novels simultaneity can be achieved only by fracturing temporal narrative sequences (Frank 1945a, 231). It follows that modern novels move towards spatial form by breaking linear narrative structure (Frank 1945a, 232). As a consequence of temporal fractures, it appears that modern novels can be understood only if considered in their unity (Frank 1945a, 232).

Flaubert's experimental narrative strategy was later recuperated by James Joyce in the composition of his *Ulysses* (Frank 1945a, 232). Joyce's novel is structured on allusions and references which are connected without taking into account the time flow of the narrative (Frank 1945a, 232). Therefore, in order to grasp the meaning of Joyce's *Ulysses*, the allusions and references the novel is disseminated with need to be linked by the reader and considered in their unity (Frank 1945a, 232). Further, like Flaubert before him, Joyce aims to depict activities taking place simultaneously (Frank 1945a, 233). Therefore Joyce himself tends to "[cut] back and forth between different actions occurring at the same time" (Frank 1945a, 233). It follows that Joyce's *Ulysses* asks the reader to associate references and allusions spatially in order to reunite the fragments

strewn throughout the novel with their respective complementary narrative parts (Frank 1945a, 234). Hence, an awareness of the novel in its unity appears indispensable to understand any section of the novel itself; however, such an understanding can be achieved only when the novel has been finished and each fragment has been connected to its complements, thereby reconstructing the novel's unity (Frank 1945a, 235).

Furthermore, it seems that also Marcel Proust deploys the same method used by Flaubert and Joyce (Frank 1945a, 235). Proust's characters are not fully accompanied through the novel, but rather tend to emerge, vanish and reappear, frequently several pages apart, throughout the narrative; consequently, the reader can reconstruct the characters' life only by comparing and contrasting their life stages and the transformations they have undergone (Frank 1945a, 239). Such a fragmented depiction of characters thus pushes the reader to connect the narrative of each character spatially (Frank 1945a, 239).

On the basis of Frank's analysis, it appears that verbal arts have moved towards spatialization (Frank 1945a, 235). However, if in poetry spatialization brings to the vanishing of logical sequence, in novels, which are Frank's main concern, spatialization tends to break the sequential order of the narrative sequence (Frank 1945a, 227, 232). In both cases it seems now necessary to move spatially when reading, in order to reconstruct the meaning of a poem or novel as a whole (Frank 1945a, 229, 232). Therefore, a poem's meaning cannot be understood by reading words in their succession, nor can a novel's meaning be perceived consecutively, by reading page after page; conversely, meaning is rather reconstructed simultaneously, by considering the poem's word-group or the novel itself in their unity (Frank 1945a, 229, 232).

### 3.4.2 Spatialized Elements within *White Teeth*

As previously mentioned, Smith's novel appears to have undergone the process of spatialization observed and described by Joseph Frank. *White Teeth*, in fact, seems to challenge Lessing's norms and to elude his strict definition according to which verbal art is inherently temporal and provides meaning consecutively (see Lessing, quoted in Frank 1945a, 223). Hence, Smith does not adapt to the limitations imposed by language and tends to deprive her novel of a sequential order, thereby conferring it a spatial dimension (see Frank 1978, 282; see Frank, 1945a, 232). Smith seems in fact unwilling to provide meaning consecutively; she rather prefers to provide it simultaneously, as visual arts usually do (see Lessing, quoted in Stevanato, 3).

In order to achieve simultaneity, the chronological order in which events occur needs to be disrupted; in fact, the fragmentation of the narrative is the only way through which simultaneity can be reached (see Frank 1945a, 231). As previously suggested, *White Teeth* is not narrated according to a chronological order. Therefore, even though words come in succession, the reader cannot rely on their succession when seeking meaning. On the contrary, he is required to move back and forth in order to link each episode to its complementary parts: the meaning of *White Teeth* can thus be reconstructed only by reuniting the fragments strewn throughout the text and by ultimately perceiving Smith's novel as a whole (see Frank 1945a, 229, 232). Therefore, on the evidence of its fragmented structure and need to be read simultaneously, *White Teeth* can be said to have undergone a process of spatialization, as it has been described by Frank.

Having explained the reasons why Smith's literary work can be considered a spatialized novel, let us now move on to analyse how *White Teeth*'s chronological sequence has been subverted, thereby increasing the novel's spatial dimension. The linearity of Smith's text is inevitably disrupted by

continuously juxtaposing events which happen simultaneously in different places. Therefore, each episode is not recounted in full. On the contrary, its temporal progression continues being interrupted by the insertion of another episode occurring simultaneously somewhere else (see Frank 1945a, 230). The chronological order of *White Teeth* is also subverted by juxtaposing past to present (see Frank 1945b, 653). Past happenings are usually recalled in order to illuminate the present and tend to be recouped as a consequence of present events which function as stimuli (see Bergson, quoted in Stevenson, 108). No past happening is recounted in full, nor is any present event, whose course is interrupted precisely by the recollection of a past occurrence. *White Teeth* is therefore constructed on frequent temporal shifts from present to past and then back to present again. Consequently, the reader is forced to move spatially in order to reconstruct each episode, since the different fragments which compose it need to be linked spatially (see Frank 1945a, 234). The chronological sequence of *White Teeth* appears to be disrupted also through allusions and references which connect elements spatially, thus requiring the reader to move back and forth throughout the novel in order to understand their meaning (see Frank 1945a, 234).

Having considered how linearity is disrupted within *White Teeth*, let us now focus on the main episodes or elements which need to be connected spatially to reconstruct their sequential order. The juxtaposition of simultaneous events seems to be quite widespread throughout Smith's novel; however, this technique does not appear to be very relevant if *White Teeth*'s concern with the past is considered. The juxtaposition between past and present and the allusions *White Teeth* is constructed upon, on the contrary, appear far more relevant when analysing the elements which have undergone a process of spatialization within Smith's novel. Both of them seem in fact to create a connection between past and present.

If the chronotope of war is considered, for instance, it can be noticed that it does not precede but follows more recent events. Even though Archibald and Samad fought in 1945, the first four chapters of *White Teeth*'s first section are set in 1974. It is only the fifth and last chapter of the first section which is devoted to the reminiscence of wartime memories. Hence the war does not precede present happenings but rather follows them, thereby juxtaposing past to present.

The war seems to be recalled as a consequence of a conversation Clara and Alsana have with Neena, Alsana's niece, who would like to know how Archibald and Samad met each other (Smith, 81). Alsana reductively replies "[o]ff killing some poor bastards who didn't deserve it, no doubt. And what did they got for their trouble? A broken hand for Samad Miah and for the other one a funny leg" (Smith, 81). *White Teeth*'s omniscient narrator, however, who knows any detail of his characters' life, does not seem satisfied with Alsana's recommendation "to look at the thing close up" (Smith, 83). Rather than focusing on the effects the war has had on Archibald and Samad, the narrator prefers recalling the period they spent in the army together. The narrator thus evokes how they met each other during the war and explains how they got wounded. Most importantly, the narrator recalls their encounter with the French geneticist Dr Marc-Pierre Perret, who at the time worked for the Nazis. Samad is convinced that the doctor can be their opportunity to return to England as heroes and believes it should be Archibald to shoot him (Smith, 118, 120). Archibald, however, has "never killed a man" and even though he thinks the doctor would deserve to be killed for his implication with Nazism, he is not willing to shoot him (Smith, 120). However, after being accused of not believing in anything, Archibald decides to do what Samad has asked him (Smith, 120-121). The execution of the doctor, however, is not related. On the contrary, the narration is resumed from the moment in which Samad hears a shot and later sees Archibald reappearing (Smith, 121-122).

However, almost four hundred pages apart from the recollection of this episode, Samad, and the reader himself, discover that Archibald never killed Perret, even though throughout the novel Samad believes, and the reader himself is encouraged to believe, that the geneticist is dead. For instance, Samad attempts to justify his choice to send one of his sons back to Bangladesh claiming it is “a choice of *morality*”, a decision Archibald can understand, since Archibald himself “[has] made hard choices” once (Smith, 189; emphasis in original). Even though “[he] hides it well”, “[he] has a bit of bullet in the leg to prove it” (Smith, 189). The reader is thus prompted to believe Archibald has killed the doctor. Unlike Samad, however, the reader later discovers that Marcus Chalfen’s mentor is a “[g]rand old Frenchman, a gentleman and a scholar” who “taught [him] practically everything [he] know[s]” and may consequently suspect that Perret is alive. Despite this allusion to a French scientist, which may prompt the reader to connect it to Perret, it is only at the end of the novel that the geneticist actually reappears and Samad, and the reader himself, discover that he is still alive.

Dr Marc-Pierre Perret reappears at the end of the novel precisely as Marcus Chalfen’s mentor (Smith, 532): “...and so if any one person deserves the lion’s share of recognition for the marvel you see before you, it is Dr Marc-Pierre Perret. A remarkable man and a very great...” (Smith, 532). Even though much time has passed since he last saw Perret, “Archie does recognize the name, faintly, somewhere inside, but he is already twisting in his seat by then, trying to see if Samad is returning. He can’t see Samad. Instead he spots Millat, who looks funny” (Smith, 532). As soon as Archibald realises that Millat is on the point of shooting Perret, Archibald suddenly moves and stops between “Millat Iqbal’s decision and his target” (Smith, 533).

At this point of the narration there is a temporal shift and once again past is juxtaposed to present. Archibald’s interposition between Millat and Perret is

thus interrupted to recall the moment in which Archibald was supposed to kill Perret:

At some point in the darkness, they stopped walking through the flatlands and Archie pushed the Doctor forward, made him stand just in front, where he could see him.

‘Stay there,’ he said, as the Doctor stepped inadvertently into a moonbeam. ‘Stay right bloody there.’

Because he wanted to see evil, pure evil; the moment of the great recognition, he *needed* to see it – and then he could proceed as previously arranged. But the Doctor was stooping badly and he looked weak. His face was covered in pale red blood as if the deed had already been done. Archie’d never seen a man so crumpled, so completely vanquished. It kind of took the wind out of his sails. He was tempted to say *You look like I feel*, for if there was an embodiment of his own pounding headache, of the alcoholic nausea rising from his belly, it was standing opposite him now. But neither man spoke; they just stood there for a while, looking at each other across the loaded gun. Archie had the funny sensation that he could *fold* this man instead of killing him. Fold him up and put him in his pocket (Smith, 533, 534; emphasis in original).

After recalling the exact moment in which Archibald wanders away from Samad to execute the doctor, the narrator also recalls the reasons why Archibald eventually does not shoot him. The reader thus discovers that on the point of being executed the geneticist understands that Archibald is “caught between duties”: on the hand, he has promised Samad he will kill the doctor; on the other hand, he seems unwilling to shoot him (Smith, 536). Being indecision Archibald’s distinctive characteristic, he ultimately decides to flip a coin in order to make a choice (Smith, 539). Archibald establishes that “if it’s head, [he]’s going to kill [him]”, “and if it’s tails, [he] won’t” (Smith, 539). Perret, however, does not seem to be willing to let his life depend on the flipping of a coin. Therefore, while Archibald waits for the coin to fall down, Perret shoots

him on his right leg (Smith, 540). “‘For fuckssake, why did you do that?’ said Archie furious, grabbing the gun off the Doctor, easily and forcefully. ‘It’s tail. See? It’s tail. Look. It was tail.’” (Smith, 540). Since it is tail, Archibald consequently decides not to kill Perret in any case. Once the execution has been recounted and the gap has been filled, there is another temporal shift, this time from past to present:

So Archie is there, there in the trajectory of the bullet, about to do something unusual, even for TV: save the same man twice and with no more reason or rhyme than the first time. And it’s a messy business, this saving people lark. Everybody in the room watches in horror as he takes it in the tight, right in the femur, spins round with some melodrama and falls right through the mouse’s glass box (Smith, 540).

Therefore, not only is the recollection of wartime memories placed after present happenings, its recounting is deliberately fragmented. The incomplete narration of wartime memories is intentionally recovered and juxtaposed to the present to illuminate it at the right moment. In order to know the whole story, the reader has thus to wait until the novel is concluded. Consequently, the reader seems to be required to link the complementary parts which constitute wartime memories spatially in order to reconstruct the story in its unity out of fragmented narrative segments.

War is not the only element within *White Teeth* which needs to be reconstructed spatially. Also the relationship between the British colonial experience and its effects on Smith’s characters has to be read in its unity in order to be fully understood. British colonial past is recalled when the headmaster of Glenard Oak decides to ask Irie and Millat to study at the Chalfens’. As suggested in a previous paragraph, such a decision can be ascribed to the sharing, from part of the headmaster, of Sir Edmund Glenard’s beliefs (Smith, 303). In order to explain Glenard’s ideals, the narrator shifts from

present to past, thereby juxtaposing once again past to present. As mentioned in the second chapter, Glenard's story is closely connected to colonialism since Glenard is a colonist who has enriched in Jamaica. Once he is on the point of returning to England, he decides to take three hundred Jamaicans to London as part of a project of mutual help (Smith, 306). This is why Glenard invests part of his money in the construction of a workhouse which successively turns into a school, precisely Irie and Millat's school (Smith, 303). Thus, the reader can now know why Glenard Oak was once a workhouse, and can consequently connect spatially the paragraph in which Glenard Oak is said to have once been a workhouse (Smith, 290) to the paragraph in which the building's past history is narrated (Smith, 303). Despite Glenard's initial interest in the undertaking, his "influence turn[s] out to be personal" rather than "professional or educational" (Smith, 307). The narrator also suggests that his influence "even ran through Irie Jones of Jamaica's Bowden clan, though she didn't know it" (Smith, 307). Despite alluding to a connection between Glenard and the Bowdens, the narrator does not provide any further detail at this point of the narrative. The narrator's allusion thus needs to be connected spatially in order to be unveiled.

Glenard's relation to the Bowdens is disclosed only fifty pages apart, when Clara recalls her family history (Smith, 356-364). Clara mentally recalls her family past after having had a conversation with Joyce Chalfen upon the side from which her daughter Irie may have received her genes (Smith, 354). Clara suggests that Irie may have been influenced by her side of the family: the Kingston earthquake appears to have "knocked the Bowden brain cells into place 'cos [they] been doing pretty well since then!" (Smith, 354). However Joyce does not seem to enjoy Clara's irony, therefore Clara decides to provide a further explanation: "But seriously, it was probably Captain Charlie Durham. He taught my grandmother all she knew. A good English education. Lord knows, I can't think who else could it be" (Smith, 355). However, as soon as Clara leaves Joyce's house, she immediately regrets telling Joyce that Irie's genes were

influenced by her grandfather, Charlie Durham, a “no-good djam fool bwoy” (Smith, 354).

Clara’s personal conviction that “[a] little English education can be a dangerous thing” seems to stem from reasons that [are close] to home: a family memory; an unforgotten trace of bad blood in the Bowdens. Her own mother, when inside *her* mother [...] was silent witness to what happens when all of a sudden an Englishman decides you need an education. For it had not been enough for Captain Charlie Durham – recently posted to Jamaica – to impregnate his landlady’s adolescent daughter one drunken evening in the Bowden larder, May 1906. He was not satisfied with simply taking her maidenhood. He had to *teach* her something as well. (Smith, 356; emphasis in original).

Clara consequently recalls her grandmother’s story, and the past is once again juxtaposed to the present. As a consequence of Clara’s memories the reader discovers further details which were only hinted at previously, such as the conception of Hortense, Ambrosia’s daughter. In addition, on the basis of these past memories, it appears that it is precisely the relationship between Ambrosia and Charlie which ultimately determines Ambrosia’s acquaintance with Glenard: since Charlie Durham has to leave Ambrosia’s village, he decides Glenard will look after her during his absence (Smith, 358). Therefore, Ambrosia’s and Glenard’s paths interweave one another. Glenard, like Charlie Durham before him, attempts to take advantage of her in name of “*the opportunity of a little education*” (Smith, 360; emphasis in original). However the Kingston earthquake surprises them precisely while they are inside Santa Antonia, a Spanish church Glenard desires to show Ambrosia, secretly aiming to take advantage of her.

And then the world began to shake. Inside Ambrosia, waters broke. Outside Ambrosia, the floor cracked. The far wall crumbled, the stained-glass exploded,

and the Madonna fell from a great height like a swooning angel. Ambrosia stumbled from the scene, making it only as far as the confessionals before the ground split once more – a mighty crack! – and she fell down, in sight of Glenard himself, who lay crushed underneath his angel, his teeth scattered on the floor, trousers round his ankles (Smith, 361).

Hence the reader finally discovers the strange circumstances in which Hortense came to the world, which were only implied or alluded to previously in the novel, and understands why, almost fifty pages before, Glenard is said to be “crushed to death by a toppled marble Madonna while Irie’s grandmother looked on” (Smith, 306). Thus the allusions disseminated throughout the book can now be linked, thereby assuming a comprehensive meaning.

Furthermore, the involvement with Charlie Durham, at first, and the acquaintance with Sir Edward Glenard, afterwards, are likely to have taught Ambrosia that “[a] little education can be a dangerous thing” (Smith, 364). This teaching seems to have been transmitted to future generations: in fact, “from that day forth no Bowden woman took lessons from anyone but the Lord” (Smith, 363). It appears that it is only when the reader has known the whole story in full that he can understand why Clara, like her grandmother before her, may be preoccupied with the risks of an English education, which now appears under the form of the Chalfens. Therefore, Alsana is not the only one to be preoccupied because of the Chalfens’ involvement with her family, Clara herself has her own reasons to fear the risks represented by an English education (Smith, 356).

As for the wartime memories, the recollection of the relationship between British colonial past and Smith’s characters is non-linear and fragmented. Furthermore, once more the past is recovered and juxtaposed to the present in order to illuminate it. In addition, it is only once that the whole story has been recounted that previous allusions become clear. After being linked to the specific episodes they refer to, the single narrative parts which complete one

another can be reunited. Therefore, no section can be read in isolation but rather needs to be connected spatially in order to recompose its meaning.

A further spatialized element within *White Teeth* is constituted by the story of Clara's mother, Hortense Bowden, and former boyfriend, Ryan Topps. Hortense and Ryan are referred to in the first section of Smith's novel, within the chapter "Teething Trouble" (Smith, 27). If at first Clara appears to run into Ryan's arms in order to escape her mother religious fanaticism, soon after she has to run away from Ryan. In fact, Ryan converts to the Witness church under Hortense's influence, consequently deciding to support Hortense in her attempts to save Clara (Smith, 37, 41). Clara, however, is not willing to be saved; therefore, as soon as she encounters Archibald Jones, she sees in him the saviour she is seeking and marries him within four weeks from their first encounter (Smith, 26, 43, 45).

From this moment onwards, the narrative does not refer to Hortense or Ryan for a while. If the disappearance of Ryan can be due to his role as Clara's former boyfriend, the reasons for Hortense's disappearance from her daughter's life are explained only hundreds of pages apart:

When Hortense Bowden, half white herself, got to hearing about Clara's marriage, she came round to the house, stood on the doorstep, said, 'Understand: I and I don't speak from this moment forth,' turned on her heel and was true to her word. Hortense hadn't pull all that effort into marrying black, into dragging her genes back from the brink, just so her daughter could bring yet more high-coloured children into the world (Smith, 327).

Hence Hortense's disapproval of Archibald appears to stem from her aversion towards mixed race marriages; consequently, after Clara's decision to marry a white man, Hortense promises not to speak to her any more (Smith, 327). Now the reader can thus finally know why, previously in the text, Hortense may have considered Archibald "an unsuitable man" for her daughter (Smith, 46).

Hortense's role within *White Teeth*, however, is not limited to the first section; on the contrary, her character is destined to reappear. When Irie discovers her mother's false teeth, which represent "another item in a long list of parental hypocrisies and untruths", Irie decides to leave her house and stay by her grandmother's (Smith, 379). Once Irie is at Hortense's, the reader is provided with further details concerning the relationship between the Joneses and Hortense. Once again the past is evoked and juxtaposed to the present: despite Hortense's absence from the narrative, the reader discovers that Hortense has actually been present in Irie's life. Even though Hortense has maintained her promise not to talk to Clara, and Clara is consequently unwilling to be in contact with her mother, Irie "[has] been a fairly regular visitor at her grandmother's" (Smith, 381). However, after her grandfather's death, Irie reveals by mistake her secret visits to her mother, who thus decides to prohibit them (Smith, 381). Therefore, since Irie is ten, she has only spoken with Hortense on the phone (Smith, 381).

It is not only Hortense who reappears at this point of the narrative; additionally, Ryan Topps reappears. The day after Irie has arrived at Hortense's, Irie sees

a bleached-out bandy-legged red-headed man with terrible posture and wellington boots, stamping away in the frosty mulch, trying to shake the remnants of a squashed tomato from his heel.

'Dat is Mr Topps,' said Hortense, hurrying across the kitchen in a dark maroon dress, the eyes and hooks undone, and a hat in her hand with plastic flowers askew. 'He has been such a help to me since Darcus died. He soothes away my vexation and calms my mind.' (Smith, 386).

Perhaps unexpectedly, Ryan is thus reinserted within the narrative. In addition, the reader discovers that Ryan has been living by Hortense's for the last six years (Smith, 387).

When Hortense introduces Irie to Ryan, he suddenly appears “to recognize her” (Smith, 390). Ryan consequently explains to Irie that he used to know Clara (Smith, 390). However, once he converted to the Witness church, all his past memories vanished (Smith, 391). However, in order to understand Ryan’s sudden change and conversion to Hortense’s church, the reader needs to move spatially once more. It is only about a hundred pages apart that Ryan’s choice is explained: “Ryan [thinks] in black and white”, therefore “[t]he problem with his antecedent passions – scootering and pop music – [is] there were always shades of grey” (Smith, 509). Thus, once he comes in contact with the church of the witnesses, Ryan finally discovers something which suits his way of thinking (Smith, 509). Due to his “mono-intelligence” and “ability to hold on to a single idea with phenomenal tenacity”, Ryan clings to his new life, rejecting any previous aspect, his love for Clara included (Smith, 509).

Therefore, Hortense’s and Ryan’s story is interrupted and resumed hundreds of pages apart, stimulated by Irie’s arrival at Hortense’s. The reader is thus required to connect and reunite the complementary fragments which constitute their story spatially, in order to reconstruct the trajectory of their lives.

Another recurrent element which is repeatedly referred to within *White Teeth* and which needs to be connected spatially is represented by teeth. To begin with, Smith’s novel contains the term ‘teeth’ in its title, which may perhaps be understood fully only once the many allusions to teeth which run throughout the novel are linked spatially.

The first episode related to teeth concerns Clara. When Archibald encounters her at the party she has thrown with her friends for the alleged end of the world, he immediately notices “[a] complete lack of teeth in the top of her mouth” (Smith, 24). However, in order to understand the reasons for such a lack, the reader has to wait for the second chapter of the first section, which is entitled “Teething Trouble” (Smith, 27), in which Clara’s lack of teeth is explained. When Clara is nineteen, she has an accident and falls of her boyfriend Ryan’s

motorbike, thereby breaking her front teeth (Smith, 44). Hence, the reader can now link the two fragments spatially in order to reconstruct how Clara lost her teeth.

Once Clara gets married, she decides to wear “a perfect set of false teeth” (Smith, 49). Such a decision, however, needs to be connected to another episode, which is recounted later in the novel, i.e. the discovery of Clara’s prosthetic teeth from part of her daughter Irie:

In the darkness Irie kicked over a glass and sucked in a sharp breath as the cold water seeped between her toes and into the carpet. Then, as the last of the water ran away, Irie had the strange and horrid sensation that she was being bitten.

‘Ow!’

‘Oh, for God’s sake,’ said Archie, reaching over to the side lamp and switching it on. ‘What now?’

Irie looked down to where the pain was. In any war, this was too low a blow. The front set of some false teeth, with no mouth attached to them, were bearing down upon her right foot (Smith, 378).

Even though the reader knows that Clara wears false teeth, and may perhaps think that every other character within her family knows about it, Irie actually discovers her mother’s set of teeth by accident (Smith, 378). The reader can now know why the image of “false teeth floating silently to the bottom of a glass” is previously associated to Samad’s efforts to forget painful memories (Smith, 209). After discovering Clara’s secret, in fact, Irie, feeling betrayed, decides to move out of her parents’ house, to stay by her grandmother’s, where she actually comes into contact with many other family secrets. In addition, it is important to highlight that, when visiting Mr Hamilton as a child as part of her participation in the Harvest Festival, Irie is told that wisdom teeth may be painful: if they do not have enough space, they may “grow crooked” or “not grow at all”, thereby provoking aching infections (Smith, 173). The pain wisdom teeth may provoke

when growing can be associated with the grief Irie feels when discovering her mother's secret false teeth. Even though the narrator suggests that family secrets "come out like wisdom teeth when the time is right" (Smith, 306), it can still be painful. Like wisdom teeth, secrets are in fact unpredictable: if "one is never sure whether one's mouth will be quite large enough to accommodate them", one cannot be sure to be able to tolerate the secret he is unveiled either (Smith, 173).

The second episode in order of appearance connected to teeth concerns Archibald's boss, Mr Hero, who has "a double row of pearly whites" (Smith, 70). The whiteness of Mr Hero's teeth, however, is suggested to be determined by "expensive dentistry" rather than by "regular brushing" (Smith, 70). A hundred of pages apart, in an episode contained in a chapter entitled "Molars" (Smith, 161), the whiteness of teeth is however referred by Mr Hamilton as a means he used to distinguish natives when fighting in Congo (Smith, 171). Therefore, despite advising Magid, Millat and Irie to brush their teeth since mammals are only given "two chances, with teeth", Mr Hamilton seems also to suggest that white teeth may be dangerous, since they may be a "marker of Blackness" (Smith, 171; Thompson, 124-125).

The three episodes cited may be connected to one another. According to Hamilton's speech, white teeth can become a means of discrimination; teeth, in fact, have been turned into "an identifier of difference" (Thompson, 124). However, the other two episodes seem to contradict Hamilton's conviction that blacks can be recognized thanks to their white teeth (Thompson, 125). In fact Archibald's boss, who is white, is said to have a perfect set of white teeth as a result of dentistry (Smith, 70). Therefore, the whiteness of teeth does not appear to be blacks' distinctive attribute, as racist discourses believe, but "can be bought, modified and reconstructed" (Thompson, 125). Furthermore, Clara, who is black, possesses straight, white teeth which are actually false (Smith, 378): therefore her teeth are not inherently white (Thompson, 125). Consequently,

Clara does not seem to possess “the stereotypically expected perfect white teeth” (Thompson, 125). Hence, the three episodes indicate the unreliability of a concept used by racial discourses to distinguish between blacks and whites (Thompson, 125). Therefore, the ‘white teeth’ of the title seem to stay for a property which is not inherent but rather “artificially constructed” (Thompson, 126). The three episodes appear thus to subvert racist discourses (Thompson, 126).

Not only does Smith seem to use the image of teeth to destabilise racist discourses; she appears to deploy it also because teeth are characterized by roots (Thompson, 124). Since many of Smith’s characters are preoccupied with controlling their historical, racial and cultural heritage or with determining socially or genetically constructed roots, the imagery of teeth acquires a specific meaning within the novel (Thompson, 124). Teeth can thus be thought to symbolise identity, since, like the self, they possess roots, they first grow and ultimately decay (Childs, 213). When Mr Hamilton explains to Irie, Magid and Millat what wisdom teeth involve, he also suggests that “they are your father’s teeth, you see, wisdom teeth are passed down by the father” (Smith, 173). Therefore, Mr Hamilton appears to imply that the growth of wisdom teeth is congenital, since it depends upon one’s ancestors. Teeth’s roots are referred to also in an episode concerning Samad, according to whom roots are good since they represent one’s culture and, consequently, tradition (Smith, 193). However, his belief that roots are good for the only reason of being roots is discarded soon after by the narrative voice: “You would get nowhere telling him that weeds too have tubers, or that the first sign of loose teeth is something rotten, something degenerate, deep within the gums” (Smith, 193). To Samad roots, which are inherited from one’s family, are inherently good, even though the narrator seems to suggest that roots can be damaging, just as teeth’s roots can rot. Furthermore, the fact that Clara wears a false set of teeth in addition to having her own teeth seems to suggest that she embodies “both the notion of rootedness and

rootlessness” (Thompson, 126). On the one hand she possesses teeth which are rooted in the gum, on the other hand teeth which, for being artificial, lack roots (Thompson, 126). If teeth’s roots are considered as a metaphor for one’s heritage, Clara’s situation implies that heritage is not as stable and secure as one would perhaps expect: Clara’s teeth, which are both rooted and rootless, thus suggest that one’s identity is not necessarily fixed, but may be uncertain too (Thompson, 126).

There is a third and last chapter within *White Teeth* which contains the word ‘teeth’ in its title: “Canines: The Ripping Teeth” (Smith, 309). If Mr Hamilton in a previous chapter judges whiteness as a distinctive characteristic of blacks’ teeth, sharpness is now considered by Alsana as a feature of Britons’ teeth (Smith, 344). Alsana turns the Chalfens’ surname into “Chaffinches”, since chaffinches, which are a type of birds, tend to “[peck] at all the best seeds” as the Chalfens do according to Alsana (Smith, 344). However, the Chalfens seem to be even “*worse*” than chaffinches, since they also have “sharp little canines” (Smith, 244). Therefore, not only do they “steal, they rip apart” (Smith, 344). Hence, teeth are here connected to “the rapacity of English colonialism” (Childs, 213).

There are other references to teeth disseminated throughout the novel. It seems as if whenever an allusion to teeth can be made when describing a character, Smith intentionally inserts it within her novel. On the basis of this, it appears that teeth are “a major preoccupation of the text” (Thompson, 124). The episodes concerning teeth cited above, however, seem to be the most relevant in order to understand Smith’s deployment of this imagery. Furthermore, despite referring to different happenings, the several episodes and references to teeth can be connected spatially in order to grasp the meaning of the imagery of teeth in its unity.

To conclude, on the basis of the spatialized elements cited above it may be claimed that both the juxtaposition between past and present and the allusions

strewn throughout the novel continuously create a connection between past and present episodes. The spatial connections thereby shaped seem to allow the past to illuminate the present. However, the past illuminates present happenings in hindsight and not from a perspective of temporal or historical progression.

### 3.4.3 The Removal of Temporal Elements as a Response to 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Cultural Context

In addition to analysing the process of spatialization which has involved both modern poetry and novels, Joseph Frank has also attempted to consider the cultural transformations of the period, which are likely to have determined the aesthetic changes in verbal form (Frank 1945a, 226). It is evident that artistic codes are connected to the cultural context within which they are shaped: thus, depending on the cultural climate within which they are produced, artistic codes tend to modify their form (Frank 1945b, 643). It is only at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, that the changes of artistic forms and the relationship between form and cultural context begins to be studied systematically (Frank 1945b, 643).

It was visual art which first attempted to motivate the changes of its form in relation to different cultural climates (Frank 1945b, 643). This does not seem to be a coincidence, since visual art attempted to experiment new forms far before verbal art; verbal art, on the other hand, began to explore new spatio-temporal relations only after plastic arts' investigations (Stevanato, 46). Thus it may be useful first to consider the theories proposed by the team of German critics who dealt with visual arts' changing form and who soon began to be guided by the English writer Hulme (Frank 1945b, 643-644). Hulme's thought and contribution to the research of the German scholars was deeply influenced by a writer, Wilhelm Worringer, whose book *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* may

be useful to explain art's changing form and its relation to the cultural context in which it is produced (Frank 1945b, 644).

Worringer's analysis focuses on the transformations plastic arts have gone through since their beginning: on the basis of his observations, Worringer noticed that naturalism and non-naturalism have continuously alternated each other in the process of creation of visual art (Frank 1945b, 644). Worringer remarked that visual arts are inclined to stress three-dimensional shapes when naturalism prevails, whereas tend to prefer plane forms when non-naturalism predominates (Frank 1945b, 644-645). In order to understand the reasons of this alternation, plastic art needs to be linked to the cultural context in which it is produced (Frank 1945b, 646). Worringer suggested that naturalism prevails in periods in which human beings live in harmony with the environment they belong to; consequently, art tends to represent nature as it is, reproducing the three-dimensional forms of objects (Frank 1945b, 646). Conversely, when human beings do not live in harmony with the outside world, non-naturalism prevails; as a consequence of the relationship of disequilibrium with the external environment, art is pushed to diminish likeness between the objects represented and reality itself. Thereby corporeality and mass are rejected and plane forms predominate over three-dimensional ones (Worringer, quoted in Frank 1945b, 646, 648).

Worringer's analysis of visual arts' transformations and relationship with the external world can be easily applied to the changes arts are going through in the modern age (Frank 1945b, 648). According to Frank, however, Hulme did not manage to follow into Worringer's footsteps in order to account for the modern transformation verbal arts, like visual arts, are undergoing (1945b, 649). Hulme certainly had the merit to understand that the changes visual arts had undergone would affect verbal arts; nevertheless, he was unable to outline with any precision a description of modern literary developments (Frank 1945b, 649).

Hence, Joseph Frank decided to rework Hulme's analysis in order to expand his intuitions (Frank 1945b, 649). Hulme's reference to Worringer's book may be very helpful to justify artistic codes' general tendency towards a spatialized form, which constitutes Frank's main concern when considering modern literature (Frank 1945b, 644). Therefore, it appears that Frank aims to explain verbal arts' tendency towards spatialization by both referring to Worringer's text and revising Hulme's work.

Frank's analysis starts by recalling Worringer's explanation of non-naturalistic styles and their loss of corporeality (see Frank 1945b, 649). Worringer's detailed description of this passage may be fundamental to understand why modern literature is becoming increasingly spatialized (Frank 1945b, 650). As suggested by Worringer, when a disharmonious relationship with the external world prevails, objects are deprived of their mass (Frank 1945b, 646). As a consequence temporality itself is diminished, since the meaning of the objects represented can be grasped in space, without requiring the eye to recompose the object (Frank 1945b, 650). Representing corporeality, conversely, provides objects with temporality, since time is required in order to allow the eye "to move backwards and forwards" to be able to recompose the objects' ultimate meaning (Frank 1945b, 650). Perhaps unexpectedly, it thus appears that visual arts are entirely spatial when not reproducing the dimension of space: hence they diminish temporality by representing plane forms which do not require time to reconstruct the image (Frank 1945b, 650). Since in the modern age visual arts tend to be non-naturalistic, it follows that they are becoming increasingly spatialized: their intrinsic spatiality is thus emphasized through the representation of plane forms which tend to eliminate any trace of temporality (Frank 1945b, 650).

According to Frank, Worringer's explanation of the loss of corporeality in visual arts, which inevitably mirrors a disharmonious relationship with the external world, may be significant to understand the movement of verbal arts

towards a spatial form (1945b, 651). Just as visual arts have emphasized their spatial dimension reducing temporality, modern verbal arts appear to be rejecting the temporal dimension in favour of a spatial dimension (Frank 1945b, 650-651). As for visual arts, literature's attempt to remove every trace of temporality seems to mirror the artists' disharmonious relationship with the outside world (Frank 1945b, 651).

The cultural context within which novelists begin to write at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is certainly one of disequilibrium with the external world: it is in fact characterized by "anxieties about clocks and clockwork" (Stevenson, 88). From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, human existence starts to be largely mastered by the clock (Stevenson, 120). Rural areas, where time is usually marked by nature and everyday life activities, are deserted in favour of industrialized cities, where time is marked by the clock (Stevenson, 117). The work in the factory is systematically organized and also everyday life is regulated by the clock: in fact, the diffusion of new means of transport and communication requires the standardization of time-systems in order to guarantee effectiveness (Stevenson, 117, 129-130). The necessity to regulate public life by relying on the clock consequently divides time into defined units, thereby depriving time of its natural continuity (Stevenson, 128). Such a strict regulation of the temporal dimension, however, is perceived as a threat by many modernist authors, who consequently begin to disrupt the chronological progression of time within their literary works, attempting to deprive the clock of the faculty to master human beings' life (Stevenson, 90, 119). The use of techniques such as stream of consciousness and interior monologue thus allows novelists to make past and present flow freely within the mind of their characters, thereby distancing their novels from a sequential chronology (Stevenson, 128).

The novelists' anxiety towards the clock and consequent disharmonious relationship with the external world appears to be amplified by the First World

War (Stevenson, 146). In fact, after the first worldwide conflict, time cannot be perceived any longer as proceeding logically and history itself cannot be perceived as progressing coherently. Destroying the progression of time as a flow, the war can thus explain why novelists, from the 1920s onwards, do not perceive time as proceeding coherently, and consequently feel the necessity to fracture their narratives, thereby reducing the novels' inherent temporal dimension (Stevenson, 147). Despite the novelists' desire to recreate the continuity time had been deprived of, due to the clock's strict regulation, the war itself decreased the perception of time as a flow (Stevenson, 128, 147). As a consequence, modernists inevitably reproduce the fragmentation and discontinuity of modern life and history (Stevenson, 147). The novels' temporal dimension is ultimately reduced, thereby increasing their spatial dimension: the reader is thus required to connect the narrative fragments spatially, moving back and forth throughout the text (Frank 1945a, 235).

By depriving their literary works of their chronological sequence, in order to deny the clock its power, and by fragmenting their narratives, in order to mirror the discontinuity of modern life and history, modernist authors ultimately reduce the temporal dimension within their literary works (see Stevenson, 88, 147). It thus appears that the changes which have occurred in literature coincide with the transformations visual arts have undergone (Frank 1945b, 651). According to Frank, such a correspondence between the development of the two arts was what Hulme was seeking but ultimately unable to detect (651). Therefore it appears that the development of form both in visual arts, which are inherently spatial, and verbal arts, which are inherently temporal, seems to be the same: throughout the twentieth century both arts have strived to diminish or remove the temporal dimension from their works, thereby moving towards spatialization (Frank 1945b, 651). Visual and verbal arts' attitude towards temporality can be explained through the cultural context in which both artistic codes are produced: visual and verbal arts' attempt to remove every trace of

temporality seems to mirror the artists' disharmonious relationship with the cultural context they are surrounded by (Frank 1945b, 651). Being artists inevitably affected by the external world, the form of their own works consequently changes too (Frank 1945b, 651).

#### 3.4.4 The Removal of Temporality in *White Teeth*: the Perception of Time as a Continuum

Like the majority of modernist authors, Zadie Smith subverts the chronological sequence within her novel, thereby reducing the novel's temporal dimension. As previously suggested, when reading Smith's novel the reader cannot rely on the meaning of words which are provided in a succession; on the contrary, the reader needs to move spatially in order to reconstruct the meaning of the novel as a whole (see Frank 1945a, 232).

However, unlike modernist novelists, Smith's decision to disrupt the chronological order of events, thereby diminishing the novel's inherent temporal dimension, seems to be determined by the conflicting relationship her characters experience between past and present: in fact, many of Smith's characters either believe or fear that the past can determine the present (Sell, 29). Smith's characters, therefore, either look at their past as a shelter or are haunted by the possibility it may reappear in their lives (Silverblatt, 13:30-13:35). As a consequence, they constantly strive to keep the two temporal dimensions separated.

Time, however, has been suggested to be arbitrarily shaped by human beings (Bergson, Einstein, quoted in Stevenson, 112). Therefore, even though Smith's characters constantly try to separate and distinguish past from present, and vice versa, past moments are destined to coexist with present moments, as a consequence of mental connections such as memory (Bergson, quoted in Stevenson, 107-108). Time is thus not considered as a chronological progression

but rather as a flow which exists within the mind of each individual (Bergson, quoted in Stevenson, 108). The idea that past and present cannot be strictly separated is supported by Freud too: past happenings may be said to be responsible for the formation of one's present nature (Freud, quoted in Stevenson, 113). Past episodes can in fact deeply influence one's life; their impact on one's present is thus unavoidable (Freud, quoted in Stevenson, 113). If for Bergson past is likely to come back through memory, dreams represent for Freud the means through which past tends to reappear (Stevenson, 113).

Therefore, despite the continuous effort from part of Smith's characters to divide time into past and present units, by fragmenting her narrative Zadie Smith ultimately deprives time of a sequential progression. In fact, by fragmenting *White Teeth's* narrative, past and present episodes are inevitably juxtaposed. Perhaps unexpectedly, the juxtaposition between past and present ultimately appears to determine the fusion of the two historical phases, thereby constituting a temporal continuum (see Frank 1945b, 652). In order to support this hypothesis it would be helpful to recall Allen Tate who, when commenting upon Pound's poem *Cantos*, stated that Pound's juxtaposition between past and present condenses them "to an unhistorical miscellany, timeless and without origin" (Frank 1945b, 652). According to Joseph Frank, Tate's analysis can be also applied to Eliot's and Joyce's works, where, as a consequence of the juxtaposing between past and present, both historical periods merge (Frank 1945b, 652).

Consequently, history is not perceived any longer as a "causal progression in time", but rather "as a continuum in which distinctions between past and present are obliterated" (Frank 1945b, 653). Similarly to visual arts, which have reduced temporality by eliminating depth, verbal arts diminish time-value by depriving history of its depth (Frank 1945b, 653). Therefore, "past and present are seen spatially, locked in a timeless unity which [...] eliminates any feeling of historical sequence by the very act of juxtaposition" (Frank 1945b, 653).

By juxtaposing past to present, Smith too seems to create a temporal continuum: the very act of fragmentation, achieved through juxtaposition, seems to destroy any sequential order, thereby denying history its depth (see Frank, 1945b, 653). As a consequence, the differences between past and present vanish and Smith can thus eliminate the distinction between temporal units. In addition, by subverting the conventional flow of time, Smith ultimately deprives the past of its cause-effect logic: it is only by fragmenting the narration that the past can be denied its prerogative to determine present happenings (Sell, 29). Therefore, despite the characters' belief or fear that the past may determine the present, the novel's structure seems to eradicate their apprehensions by eliminating the idea of definite past and present units, which appear to merge thereby creating a temporal continuum (see Frank, 1945b, 653).

To conclude, despite the different point of departure, both modernists and Smith decide to subvert the chronological sequence within their narratives, in order to prevent both the clock and determinism from shaping definite temporal units. Thus, it should not be surprising that both modernists and Smith obtain a similar narrative structure: only a non-linear narrative can in fact challenge the modernists' clock and the deterministic attitude of Smith's characters.

### 3.5 Conclusion

When analysing the process of spatialization in modern literature, Joseph Frank recalls Worringer's claim according to which "formal value" has to show "to be an accurate expression of the inner value, in such a way that duality of form and content cease to exist" (Worringer, quoted in Frank 1945b, 651). Despite referring to visual arts, Worringer's principle can be applied to verbal arts (see Frank, 1945b, 650). Hence, similarly to other modernist novels, *White Teeth's* form and thematic contents seem to convey a similar meaning.

Worringer's belief can thus be used in order to point out the connections between *White Teeth's* contents and form and to explain the involvement of the novel's form with identity issues which are central to the novel's contents.

Our analysis of *White Teeth's* form started by considering the simultaneous deployment, from part of Zadie Smith, of realist and modernist devices, which interweave within the novelist's work. Their interrelation may not appear casual, but rather seems to reflect Smith's thematic issues. Just as Smith's characters appear to be characterized by ambivalent and often contradictory aspects of identity, the form of Smith's novel, by combining traditional and innovative techniques, does not appear uniform either. Therefore, ambivalence and ambiguity are representative not only of *White Teeth's* topics, but of its form too.

Further, if Bhabha's considerations on the relationship between form and national identity are taken into account, it may be claimed that the concomitant use of modernist devices together with realist techniques challenges a traditional construction of Englishness (Bhabha 1990, 292; Bentley, 488). Therefore, Smith's decision to combine tradition and innovation can be ascribed to her desire to speak to the English readership, along with the minorities she represents through her topics (Bentley, 497-498). Realism is in fact part of English literary tradition and is obviously well-known among English readership (Bentley, 497). Therefore, in addition to portraying the predicaments and dilemmas immigrants and their offspring experience when moving to or growing up in the UK, Smith also appears to address the Englishmen to make them aware of the UK's changed environment (Bentley, 501). In order to do so, Smith deploys a form they are accustomed with and combines it with modernist techniques which ultimately alter a conventional depiction of national identity (Bentley, 488, 497). Smith appears thus to suggest that Englishness itself should be revised taking into account both tradition, constituted by "established

constructions of Englishness”, and innovation, constituted by “an emergent national identity” (Bentley, 498).

Through the ambivalence of her novel’s form, Smith appears also to imply that the postmodern self itself should learn to accept ambivalence as part of its existence, since identity cannot be as coherent and stable as Smith’s characters wish (see Bauman 2007a, 26). Furthermore, if the coexistence of realism and modernism is possible, the postmodern self can handle the concomitance of traditional and new acquired values. Being identity incoherent and unstable, the postmodern self appears to be required to negotiate between its past beliefs and new assimilated values, just as the novel’s form makes a negotiation between conventional features and innovative techniques. A negotiation between tradition and innovation thus appears to be indispensable not only in the construction of national identity, but also in the formation of individual identity (see Bentley, 498).

After having considered the interrelation between realism and modernism, our analysis has focused in detail on the disruption of the chronological sequence within *White Teeth*. It has been noticed that the disruption of the narrative’s linearity is achieved by juxtaposing past to present (see Frank 1945b, 653). Such a juxtaposition does not only seem to affect the novel’s form and structure, but thematic contents too, since it provokes the continuous intrusion of past happenings within characters’ present. If the past appears to be juxtaposed to the present in order to deprive it of its cause-effect logic (Sell, 29), the novel’s structure ultimately seems to remind Smith’s characters that history, both personal and collective, cannot be entirely erased or escaped. Therefore, even though it appears to be useless to shape one’s present by relying entirely on the past, the opposite attitude would be pointless too. Just as *White Teeth*’s form implies that the past tends to reappear, Smith’s characters also seem to face the intrusion of the past within their lives. When constructing their identity, Smith’s characters are in fact likely to experience conflicts connected to their heritage

and roots. The construction of subjective identity is also inevitably linked to history; personal roots therefore interweave historical happenings. Consequently, Smith's characters not only face their personal roots, but, simultaneously, the British colonial past, whose effects need to be taken into account when constructing both individual and national identity.

If the juxtaposition between past and present provokes the continuous reappearance of the past, which implies that history, both personal and collective, can neither be erased nor entirely escaped, it also seems to have a further effect on *White Teeth's* thematic issues. As suggested in the previous paragraph, in fact, this juxtaposition appears to deprive contents of their deterministic and cause-effect logic: even though the past cannot be entirely escaped, the present is not "inevitably historically determined" (Sell, 29). If through her novel's form Smith creates a temporal continuum (see Frank 1945b, 653), in which past and present are equated, Smith's characters, who either trust or fear the past, should learn, as the novel's form teaches, that past and present actually constitutes a continuum, therefore the past should not be believed to predetermine the present. The life of Smith's characters in fact proves not to be easily predictable, therefore past does not seem to necessarily predetermine their existence, as characters either believe or fear. Despite characters' attempts to control and shape their identity and life by either relying on or refusing past roots, Smith seems to reject determinism through both her form and subject matter: from a formal perspective Smith deprives past of its prerogative to determine the present (Sell, 29); from the point of view of thematic issues she highlights her characters' hopeless and failing efforts to shape their own or others' identity and life trajectories coherently (Head, 114).

In conclusion, Worringer's belief in the unity between form and contents seems to be respected in Smith's novel *White Teeth* (see Worringer, quoted in Frank 1945b, 650). Such a unity appears to be very important also to explain the relevance formal aspects have within Smith's novel, whose meaning coincides

with that of *White Teeth*'s thematic issues. To begin with, the concomitance of realism and modernism seems to mirror the ambivalence Smith's characters experience when dealing with their own identities and life. Further, if tradition and innovation can coexist from a formal perspective, traditional and new-acquired values may coexist within human beings' identities and lives. In addition, the form appears to suggest the impossibility to escape the past, which continues reappearing in characters' life, asking them to mediate between past and present values and beliefs. The attempt, from part of some characters, to constitute personal identity by not taking into account roots does not seem successful. However, some other characters' efforts to cling to the past is not effective either: the novel's form, by creating a temporal continuum, seems thus to suggest that past happenings do not necessarily determine the present but are rather equated to present happenings (Sell, 29).

## Conclusion

This thesis has focused on Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth*, which has contributed to depicting the changed nature of the British self and, consequently, of Englishness too. The predicaments identity needs to face today are considered by Smith in the context of 20<sup>th</sup>-century multicultural London, taking thus into account the transformations contemporary England has gone through. Therefore, the British self, and Englishness itself, are not considered in isolation from external reality, but in relation to it (see Elliott, 9). The understanding of selfhood, in fact, can be accomplished only by relating the self to the external environment (Elliott, 7). Therefore, the implications that factors such as postmodernity and post-colonialism have for identity cannot be ignored when considering the changes the British self and Englishness have experienced lately.

Thus, it is not a coincidence that Smith's characters are constantly confronted with predicaments determined by external factors. To begin with, the existence of Smith's characters appears characterized by instability and ambivalence which are distinctive of postmodernity (see Bauman 1991b, 173). Smith's characters, in fact, live in a postmodern world, which, unlike the modern world<sup>8</sup>, does not supply the self with secure certainties (see Bauman 2007a, 25). If during modernity order and stability were constructed and preserved by the state, after globalization nation-states have turned ineffective and State's affairs have become indeterminate and unresolvable (Bauman 1998, 299, 300). Globalization has thus disrupted the order modernity had attempted to achieve, leading the path to the condition of postmodernity (Bauman 1998, 299).

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<sup>8</sup> As it is understood by several scholars amongst which there is Bauman (see p. 6)

As a consequence, the formation of identity is not based any longer on a stable social environment; the precariousness of a disorderly, ambivalent and unstable world denies in fact the self the possibility of constructing an unambiguous identity (Bauman 2007a, 25-26). Furthermore, postmodernity is also characterized by the abandonment of transcendental beliefs: factors such as religion, history and reason have progressively been abandoned, thereby making the self become even more conscious of the instability and disorder the world in which it lives is characterized by (Touraine, 101).

Smith's characters, however, tend to act without taking into account the implications of living in a postmodern world. In fact, they are unlikely to tolerate an ambivalent, incoherent existence (Paproth, 9), even though it is distinctive of a postmodern condition (see Bauman reader, 173). They thus behave as if they were 'modern', rather than postmodern, selves, and constantly try to determine fixed identities and secure trajectories of life (Paproth, 9-10). Smith's characters seem therefore to desire a coherent identity and life, which do not appear possible in postmodernity, which is actually characterized by multiplicity, diversity and ambiguity, values against which both modernity and Smith's characters struggle (Bauman 1991b, 173-174). Their attitude, however, appears ineffective in a postmodern world and their efforts to intentionally shape their existence ultimately prove unsuccessful (Paproth, 9, 10). Thus, despite their continuous efforts to shape an unambiguous selfhood, the identity of Smith's characters ultimately appears fragmented; each individual is in fact exposed to many different, perhaps contrasting, aspects throughout his existence and is thereby required to accept an ambivalent and incoherent identity (see Bauman 2012a, 13).

The ambiguity Smith's characters feel appears to be increased by the legacy of the colonial experience. The British Empire came to an end towards the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, as a consequence of the colonies' claim for independence, which led the path to decolonization (Marzola, 197). After having obtained

independence, however, the inhabitants of many former colonies began to migrate to the UK, due to the lack of stability of their own nations. By doing so, they inevitably contributed to determining England's increasingly multiethnic and multicultural environment (Marzola, 199). Therefore, it is not surprising that the majority of the characters portrayed by Smith are mixed-race or descend from immigrants.

As a consequence of this, their existence is even more conflicting: in addition to facing the dilemmas any postmodern self deals with, these characters are also influenced by the implications the British colonial experience has on the formation of their own identities and lives. Not surprisingly, the legacies of the British colonial past raise questions regarding roots and belonging, which Smith's characters try to answer when shaping their identity (Squires, 13). It may thus be claimed that Smith's characters, along with facing the predicaments of a postmodern world, are confronted with a further external factor, represented by colonialism and its legacies.

Just as Smith's characters, which constitute the novel's subject matter, are likely to be typified by ambivalent components of identity, the literary form of *White Teeth*, by combining conventional and innovative devices, is not homogeneous either. Ambivalence is therefore representative not only of *White Teeth's* contents, but of its form too. Through the form of her novel Smith appears thus to imply that the self cannot define its identity coherently, but rather needs to accept ambivalence as one of its constitutive components. If conventional and innovative forms can be combined, traditional and new acquired values can also coexist within the self (see Bentley, 497-498).

In addition to portraying the ambiguities and contradictions the British self experiences in a postcolonial and postmodern world, through her novel's form Smith also seems to imply that Englishness itself needs to be rethought as a consequence of the UK's changed environment (Bentley, 497-498). Hence, Smith's choice to unite realist and modernist devices may also be attributed to

the author's aspiration to address the English readership, in addition to the minorities Smith portrays as her subject matter (Bentley, 497-498). In order to do so, Smith exploits literary form, which, as pointed out by Bhabha, can influence the representation of Englishness: if realism tends to portray a traditional conception of Englishness, modernist techniques may challenge an established sense of national identity (Bhabha 1990, 303; Bentley, 488). Therefore, it may be claimed that Smith's decision to unite a literary form English readers are familiar with, i.e. realism, with modernist devices and a postcolonial subject matter aims to challenge a conventional representation of English national identity (Bentley, 497).

Therefore, not only does *White Teeth* focus on the predicaments of the self; her novel can be also said to contribute to the reconfiguration of Englishness. By portraying the multicultural environment of contemporary London, in which her characters live, Smith appears in fact to prompt the UK to reshape its national identity by taking into account the social and cultural changes which have occurred throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Bentley, 501). Smith appears thus to imply that English national identity should be reconsidered taking into account both a traditional construction of Englishness and its emergent, multiracial shapes (Bentley, 498). Ambivalence is thus characteristic of both individual and national identity.

Furthermore, not only is the novel's form heterogeneous, due to the concomitant use of traditional and innovative techniques; it is fragmented too, owing to the wide-ranging disruption of its chronological sequence. As a consequence of Smith's formal choices the narration of *White Teeth* is extremely fractured and the novel is consequently composed of several different temporal units. Therefore, as is the postmodern self and English society, the form of Smith's novel too is both ambivalent and fragmented.

Smith's decision to deprive her narrative of a sequential progression stems from her urge to prevent time from distinguishing between past and present

units: Smith's characters tend in fact to have a conflicting relationship with their own past and, consequently, with their present. Thus, in order to deprive temporal units of their influence on characters, past and present are juxtaposed, thereby determining the novel's non-linear narrative and consequent temporal continuity (Frank 1945b, 653). By depriving the past of its prerogative to determine the present, the novel's form is likely to imply that identity itself is not predetermined (Sell, 29). However, the past tends to reappear: as a consequence of fragmentation, in fact, past episodes continuously reappear in characters' life. The effect of fragmentation seems thus to imply that identity, despite not being shaped by the past, nonetheless requires to take it into account. In the construction of identity, in fact, the past cannot be erased; conversely, identity is the result of a negotiation between both past and present (see Beukema, 1, 4).

However, despite the ambivalence and fragmentation the novel is characterized by, the ambivalent and fragmented components, which are distinctive of both its subject matter and form, combine, in order to constitute *White Teeth* as a whole. Thus, it may be claimed that Smith is suggesting that identity, just as her novel, can still form a unique entity, despite its ambiguities, fragmentation and discontinuity. Hence, the novel can be understood as a 'recomposed self', which can stay for both the British ambiguous self and England's multicultural identity. Both of them, in fact, despite their internal difference and division, can still constitute an entity as the novel does. Smith's novel proves in fact that unity is possible despite the ambivalence and the fragmentation which constitute both its contents and form.

Smith, being the author of the novel, silently supervises and directs the creation of *White Teeth*, and seems thus to imply that the British self can exist despite the ambiguities and contradictions which may constitute it. By combining characters who continuously experience internal conflicts amongst the components of their identity and stylistic devices which may even appear in

contradiction to one another, Smith seems to prove that old and new acquired values, traditional and innovative techniques, can coexist. Ambivalence, being the prevalent condition of postmodernity and of post-colonialism, needs thus to be accepted, since existence is no longer as coherent and defined as it used to be during modernity (Bauman 1991b, 173).

These reflections do not seem to relate to the self and individual identity alone, but can be applied to English national identity too. In fact, the self is not the only one to be asked to accept ambivalence and negotiate between old and new acquired values, Englishness requires to be revised as a consequence of the multicultural society which has emerged after the end of the Empire (see Bentley, 497; see Marzola, 199). This is the reason why Smith's novel can be said to shape a *revised version* of both individual and national identity (see Bentley, 497, 498). *White Teeth*, through both its thematic contents and form, appears thus to point out the dilemmas the self is required to face when shaping identity and the predicaments England face when defining national identity in a postmodern, postcolonial world (Bentley, 501).

In conclusion, through her novel, which can be compared to an ambivalent, fragmented self, Smith shows that different, fractured components can still coexist and create a unique though multifaceted unit. Through *White Teeth* Zadie Smith seems thus to imply that, if a negotiation is required and appears possible within her novel, also the British self and English national identity can manage to negotiate amongst the several multiple components or voices they are composed of, thereby managing to constitute one though multifaceted entity.

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